



Sustainability and neoliberalisation in the political blogosphere

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By Zhou Zhou

School of Social and Political Sciences

University of Canterbury

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Table of Contents

List of figures	1
List of tables.....	2
Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	4
1 Introduction	5
2 Literature review.....	9
2.1 History of environmental concern	9
2.1.1 Transitioning environmental movement	9
2.1.2 Brundtland report & sustainable development.....	10
2.2 Sustainability & neoliberalisation: a love-hate relationship	11
2.2.1 “Sustainability” too vague.....	11
2.2.2 Neoliberalisation of nature	13
2.2.3 Issues with the neoliberalisation of nature	14
2.3 Looking ahead: how sustainability could be conceptualised.....	19
2.3.1 Redefining progress	19
2.3.2 Reducing consumption	19
2.3.3 Acknowledging and reducing inequality.....	21
2.3.4 Localising sustainability.....	22
3 Media’s sustainability discourse	24
3.1 Media and democracy	24

3.2	Political media.....	25
3.3	Commercial media	26
3.3.1	Sustainability and the environment in mainstream media	27
3.4	The online environment and the environment online	29
3.4.1	Internet and blogs.....	29
4	Methodology.....	36
4.1	Research questions	36
4.2	Sampling.....	36
4.2.1	Advertising-present.....	36
4.2.2	Advertising-free	39
4.2.3	Blog post sample	41
4.3	Online observation.....	41
4.4	Qualitative discourse analysis.....	43
4.5	Quantitative content analysis	46
5	Results.....	49
5.1	How political bloggers discuss sustainability	49
5.1.1	Rarely and superficially	49
5.1.2	Liberals vs Conservatives	50
5.1.3	Distanced from the environment.....	60
5.1.4	Demotivating and disempowering audiences	62
5.2	Neoliberalism in bloggers' sustainability discourse	64

5.2.1	The price of sustainability	64
5.2.2	The changing face of governance	67
5.2.3	Individualised answers to sustainability	71
5.3	Advertising's influence on bloggers' sustainability discourse	73
5.3.1	Limited influences on content	73
5.3.2	Blogs as advertising niches.....	75
5.3.3	Differences in engagement style	77
5.4	How political blogs facilitate unique sustainability discussions	78
5.4.1	Enhancing objectivity through subjectivity.....	78
5.4.2	Comments and interactivity.....	82
5.4.3	Linking	86
5.4.4	Collaboration through sharing	87
5.4.5	On and offline practices	90
5.4.6	Replacing or complementing the fourth estate?.....	93
6	Discussion.....	96
6.1	How political blogs discuss sustainability	96
6.2	Neoliberalism in sustainability discourse.....	96
6.3	Advertising's influence.....	100
6.4	Facilitating unique sustainability discussions?.....	101
6.5	Future research recommendations	102
7	Conclusion.....	105

Appendix I Coding sheet.....	125
Appendix II Additional coding rules.....	128

List of figures

Figure 3.1 Forms of resistive activism.....	34
Figure 5.1 Motivation to act sustainably	62
Figure 5.2 Audience empowerment	63
Figure 5.3 Aspects of sustainability discussed	65
Figure 5.4: Who is enhancing sustainability	69
Figure 5.5: Who is preventing sustainability.....	69
Figure 5.6: How sustainability is enhanced in all posts	70
Figure 5.7 Sources mentioned in text or linked to.....	79
Figure 5.8 Sharing options on <i>The Standard</i>	88
Figure 5.9 Sharing options on <i>Home Paddock</i>	88
Figure 5.10 Sharing options on <i>Grist</i>	88
Figure 5.11 Commenting features on <i>Huffington Post</i> , showing the options for sharing, viewing and rating comments	89

List of tables

Table 4.1 Top three blogs in the “green blogs” AND top 100, with advertising, according to Technorati ranking.....	37
Table 4.2 Top three New Zealand political blogs with advertising, according to Alexa and Technorati	38
Table 4.3 Top six New Zealand political blogs without commercial advertising, according to four ranking criteria	39
Table 4.4 The twelve blogs chosen for analysis	40

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Abstract

The following research analyses popular political blogs from the US and New Zealand, focussing on the way environmental sustainability is conceptualised and the way neoliberalism is embedded within these conceptualisations. This study follows from the recognised importance of sustainability, its tense relationship with neoliberalisation, the significance of media in communicating sustainability, and the emergence of political blogs as both purported supplement to, and contesters of, mainstream media.

To explore these four areas of inquiry, a mixed methods approach was adopted, utilising qualitative observational research to set context for a discourse analysis, and a quantitative content analysis to support the validity of reliably measurable aspects of the qualitative findings. First, the way sustainability was discussed on the sample of political blogs; second, whether and how neoliberalism was embedded in the blogs' sustainability discourse; third, advertising and commercial influence on these blogs' sustainability discourse; and fourth, how the selected political blogs might facilitate unique sustainability discussions compared to mainstream media.

The findings in this study of a small sample of political blogs discussed sustainability rarely and superficially, with partisanship reducing much of the discussion to a personal level. Far from challenging neoliberal discourse, the political blogs in this study mostly discussed sustainability with a focus on the economic costs, and more specifically, they reinforced neoliberal solutions to the sustainability problem regardless of advertising presence or political leaning. Advertising presence did not result in vastly different perspectives about sustainability, compared to mainstream media portrayals. Even though political blogs theoretically have great *potential* to challenge central tenets of the existing neoliberalisation of nature, there were few examples of this potential being fulfilled. The political blogs studied here largely facilitated unchallenging, superficial discussions about sustainability, however these discussions were still occasionally a useful place for individuals to access perspectives and political debate otherwise not available or obvious to them in their immediate geographic location. The overwhelming acceptance of the neoliberalisation of nature, even in the independent political blogs in this study, suggests that further research about sustainability and neoliberalism in the media is needed if effective communication of sustainability issues is to transpire.

1 Introduction

It is now widely accepted both by leading science authorities (Burgess, Bedford, Hobson, Davies, & Harrison, 2003, p. 261; S. Harris, 2007, p. 50) and ordinary citizens (PR Newswire, 2009), that sustainability, particularly environmental, is not only a desirable, but necessary goal. Environmental concern has not escaped the mainstream media or the general public (Ader, 1995, p. 301; Shanahan, 1993, p. 182). The Union of Concerned Scientists, supported by 1600 prominent scientists, and 58 scientific academies globally, have voiced concern over resource depletion, as well as the causes: “rapid population growth, wasteful resource consumption, environmental degradation and poverty” (Speidel, 2003, pp. 1-2). The current rates of environmental change caused by anthropogenic disturbances have challenged ecosystems, and subsequently human life (F. Harris, 2004, p. 266), and within the business community, there is acknowledgement that “patterns of growth and development would be unsustainable if they continued unchecked” (Li & Pak, 2010, p. 252).

Despite the urgent need to ameliorate these challenges, there is little consensus on what sustainable development should mean in practice (F. Harris, 2004, p. 266). Jamieson (1998, p. 188) aptly describes the situation:

Disagreements about sustainability reflect not only different interests, but also different ideals and values. These involve disagreements about the range of proper human relationships to nature, how decisions should be made, and whose voices should prevail.

On a general level, sustainability and sustainable development may be vaguely understood and embraced to varying extents, however its implementation continues to generate debate (Okereke, 2008, p. 147). One major clash in these debates arises due to the “inextricably interwoven” relationship between “neoliberalism, environmental change, and environmental politics” (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004, p. 275).

“Neoliberalism,” as has been pointed out, “seems to alter its shape from paper to paper” (Castree, 2006, p. 1), however this thesis adopts “neoliberalism” as a reference to the ever-developing political economic philosophy seeking to minimise governmental control of the market and individuals’ interactions with it (McCarthy, Robbins, Prudham, & Heynen, 2007, p. 3). Heynen & Robbins note four major aspects of neoliberalisation which are particularly relevant to sustainability, and this thesis. These are:

Governance, the institutionalized political compromises through which capitalist societies are negotiated; *privatization*, where natural resources, long held in trust by regional, state and municipal authorities, are turned over to firms and individuals; *enclosure*, the capture of common resources and exclusion of the communities to which they are linked; and *valuation*, the process through which invaluable and complex ecosystems are reduced to commodities through pricing (2005, p. 6)

The basis of such policy prescriptions is to protect “abstract constructions of yeoman entrepreneurial capitalists and small businesses (as opposed to powerful, footloose multinationals) struggling under the oppressive weight of an overbearing state” (McCarthy, et al., 2007, p. 5). Private and exclusive property rights granted to individuals are equated to inalienable rights, freedoms, and responsibilities of individuals. Neoliberalisation has been argued “to expand opportunities for capital investment and accumulation by reworking state–market–civil society relations to allow for the stretching and deepening of commodity production, circulation and exchange” (McCarthy, et al., 2007, p. 10). Yet “what precisely *produces* these effects” (Castree, 2006, p. 2) continues to generate unease within the literature. Neoliberalism has been dubbed as “the most powerful ideological and political project in global governance to arise in the wake of Keynesianism” (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004, p. 275). However some suggest that it may be no more than a series of “*ad hoc*” responses to a mixture of social changes (Barnett, 2005, p. 10). Nevertheless, neoliberalisation is still often seen to cause many of the most serious collective environmental quandaries and thus generates much of its opposition from environmentalism (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004, p. 275; 277). While environmentalists insist that the future wellbeing of economic actors relies on the global ecosystem, mainstream economics insists that the stability of the global market is dependent on perpetual growth of productive activities by these economic actors (Nadeau, 2003, p. 5). Castro (2004, p. 216) points out that the differing goals of the capitalist system (capital accumulation) and environmental sustainability are more often than not irreconcilable. One of the arenas in which these conflicts can be observed is the media.

Enhancing public awareness, understanding and interest in environmental issues and policy is desirable if international progress on sustainability is to be made. Media coverage constitutes one of many major sources that the public uses to conceptualise and inform their ideas about sustainability, and therefore media coverage about the environment deserves great scrutiny (Hansen, 2010, p. 159; Kolandai-Matchett, 2009, p. 1). This is especially the case since most people have limited known contact with environmental problems and rely on the media to inform them (Ader, 1995, p. 300). More specifically, the *ideologies* that the media support and reject with regards to the environment

also deserve attention (Shanahan, 1993, p. 183), because it may be counter-productive, for example, to advocate for increased environmental coverage if much of the coverage reinforces environmental negligence (p. 195).

The existing literature that looks at mainstream media's coverage of environmental problems has often found that coverage is dominated by commercial imperatives. Those challenging existing power relationships or the ideals of the market system are generally marginalized, which is problematic given that many environmental issues are inevitably costly (Lewis, 2000, p. 247). As major players in the global market system, mainstream media are unlikely to challenge its logic and central values, nor point out the inequalities inevitably created by a market system (Schiller, 2000, pp. 135-136). Research on the coverage of sustainable development shows similar coverage, as discussed in the literature review.

This research therefore aims to evaluate the blogosphere as a possible site of alternative environmental discourse in contrast to the mainstream media. Ultimately, the research aims implicitly acknowledge that environmental sustainability is a desirable and necessary goal. The direction society takes to define and achieve sustainability (or not) will depend on the discourses propagated by various sources, including (but not limited to) a vast array of media. This thesis therefore examines how sustainability is discussed in the political blogosphere, given that a vast literature on the environment in mainstream media coverage already exists. It makes sense to study the growing realm of political blogs at this point in time for several key reasons. There is growing evidence of mainstream news' utilisation of blogs as sources and agenda setters (Collister, 2008; Farrell & Drezner, 2008). Therefore the way in which political blogs conceptualise sustainability may help illuminate future paths toward a more holistically improved communications strategy.

According to the very small literature on neoliberalisation and nature, the "connections between neoliberalism, environmental change, and environmental politics remain under-explored in critical scholarship" (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004, p. 275). Research in these areas mostly consists of isolated case studies, with little examination or explanation of the connections and differences between them (Bakker, 2010, p. 721). Hopefully, this study of nationally specific, citizen-produced media will contribute to this literature without losing sight of the specific cultural context the blogs operate in. Bloggers are situated within a national context, yet they are also able to access a medium (the Internet) which is very global in orientation, and this is visible in the way political blog content is often predominantly grounded in the host country yet also covers issues abroad when relevant

(Pole, 2009, p. 15). Little research has been based in industrialised countries, where calls for neoliberal reforms originated (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004, p. 275). Therefore New Zealand blogs were selected for study as the thesis is being written by a New Zealander who would have a more nuanced understanding of the politics discussed in the blogs, in addition to US blogs, as the US has the greatest Internet penetration worldwide (Internet World Stats, 2011).

The following analysis of both New Zealand and US political blogs hopes to explore areas under-addressed in the literature, with four research questions:

1. What are the key ways in which environmental sustainability is discussed by political bloggers?
2. How is neoliberalism situated within bloggers' discourse about environmental sustainability, if at all?
3. What are the differences, if any, in how advertising-present and advertising-free blogs discuss environmental sustainability?
4. How might political blogs facilitate unique discussions about sustainability?

The structure of this thesis will be as follows. Chapter 2 will first explicate the tensions between sustainability and neoliberalism, why these tensions matter in the path towards a more sustainable future, and how scholars believe sustainability could be reconceptualised. Chapter 3 will review the way mainstream media has generally covered environmental sustainability, the way commercialism affects these representations, and the potential for political blogs to present more progressive discourses and spaces that challenge mainstream portrayals. In light of the existing literature, Chapter 4 details the methods this thesis used to answer the research questions. Chapter 5 details the results ordered by research question, followed by a discussion of the wider implications of the research in Chapter 6, which also notes further areas of research that could flow on from this study. Chapter 7 concludes the research.

2 Literature review

2.1 History of environmental concern

Several key phenomena that contributed to the mainstreaming of holistic environmental concerns from the 1960s onwards (Hansen, 2010, p. 160) are relevant to this thesis. Relatively fortunate social and political conditions helped produce a generation that was willing and able to focus on non-material needs and desires (see Hajer, 1997, pp. 75-94). The widely circulated image of Earth taken from outer space encapsulated the fragility of the ecological systems life depended on (Hajer, 1997, p. 8). “Earth day” was subsequently established (Ader, 1995, p. 301), and by 1970, environmentalism became “a force to be reckoned with” (Nadeau, 2003, p. 3). Key written works also made environmental problems salient for lay people. *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, written in 1962, highlighted the importance of biodiversity and the complex and damaging effects of pesticides, and in 1972 *Limits to Growth*, by the Club of Rome, warned of the consequences of unchecked population and consumption (Eagan, 2008, p. 40). The 1970s saw a proliferation of coordinated governmental action, with the creation of the US Environmental Protection Agency, the first international conference on the environment in Stockholm, and the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (Nadeau, 2003, p. 4). The growing movement in the 1970s for environmental protection through regulation also prompted a response from the United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development (Castro, 2004, p. 216).

2.1.1 Transitioning environmental movement

Several changes to the environmental movement were necessitated by floundering economic conditions in the late 1970s, which forced a new marriage of environmental care to economic restructure (Hajer, 1997, p. 94). The new movement embraced “ecological modernization,” which had far more widespread appeal due to a newfound acceptance of technology’s ability to help ease the burden on nature as well as create burdens (Hajer, 1997, p. 95). Perhaps most importantly, ecological modernization did not represent a threat to the capitalist system and even worked with it to produce further economic growth – environmental policy therefore suddenly became beneficial for all (p. 98). It has since become “the dominant way of conceptualizing environmental matters in terms of policy-making” (p. 100). However the increasingly widespread acknowledgement of an environmental crisis stoked by anthropogenic forces continues to face disagreement in terms of what implications such a crisis should entail (Hajer, 1997, pp. 13-14; F. Harris, 2004, p. 266).

While environmentalism is often a key form of opposition toward neoliberalism, both have also absorbed key parts of each other's concerns and ideology. This is evident in new concepts that developed throughout the Reagan-Thatcher decades such as free market environmentalism, which have served to further entrench the ideals of neoliberal governance worldwide (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004, p. 279). As previously described, "sustainable development" and green capitalism are further reflections of this process of assimilation, which "has done far more to smooth the 'roll out' of neoliberalizations than attempts to dismiss or reject environmental concerns outright" (ibid). In official rhetoric, there has been a "shift in emphasis from conflicts to consensus, to the reconciliation of economic and environmental considerations." (Välvirronen & Hellsten, 2002, p. 239). It is perhaps this compromise which has contributed to "sustainability" being so easily embraced, yet so contested, by groups with totally different interests (Castro, 2004, p. 195). Paradoxically, despite their opposing values, "neoliberalism and modern environmentalism have together emerged as the most serious political and ideological foundations of post-Fordist social regulation" (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004, p. 275).

2.1.2 Brundtland report & sustainable development

The Brundtland Report, published in 1987, officiated the importance of the environment and entrenched the concept of "sustainable development" (p. 196). The Brundtland Report's definitive elaboration of sustainable development may have been proactive and even included recommendations that go against neoliberal principles (see Okereke, 2008, pp. 146-167). However, the report still suffers from a major clash of priorities, in that it is supported by the capitalist imperative for growth. Some critics therefore believe the report is more about economic, rather than ecological, development (Castro, 2004, p. 220; Hajer, 1997, p. 12). Therefore even though "sustainable development" as defined by The Brundtland report has since become the guiding light in the environmental debate in politics (Hajer, 1997, pp. 8-9), as well as international development (Castro, 2004, p. 195), the term has been flaunted by varying groups with seemingly contrasting interests and differing emphases on what should be prioritised (F. Harris, 2004, p. 267). Prior to the Brundtland report, "sustainability" exclusively referred to prioritising "saving the environment" (p. 267). However, the Brundtland report's key findings also focussed on the problems of world poverty.

To alleviate both environmental problems and poverty, the report highlighted a balancing of the "Three Es" - that is, the environment, economic prosperity and social equity (Eagan, 2008, p. 40). The dual focus on the environment and development to alleviate poverty was further entrenched

more recently at both the UN conference on Environment and development (UNCED) in 1992 (F. Harris, 2004, p. 272) and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 (p. 270). Sustainability now revolves around the ultimate aim of “meeting the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (Schaefer & Crane, 2005, p. 77). Its focus is felt widely:

sustainability has become the number one concern of the United Nations and numerous leading science authorities, as the implications of global warming and the currently unsustainable level of exploitation of Planet Earth’s finite resources are becoming better understood and more widely felt (United Nations Environment Programme, 2005) (S. Harris, 2007, p. 50).

Sustainable development became a middle road where environmental and economic aims were supposedly married, in an attempt to overcome prior conflicts (Väliaverronen & Hellsten, 2002, p. 239). Environmental economics eventually developed as a subfield of the discipline to include environmental factors in economic calculations (Castro, 2004, p. 203). With many businesses increasingly taking on a “green” image, and with greater acceptance of “light-green” environmentalism amongst mainstream media and consumers, it became clear that environmentalism was no longer just of interest to environmentalists (Shanahan, 1993, pp. 181-182).

2.2 Sustainability & neoliberalisation: a love-hate relationship

2.2.1 “Sustainability” too vague

Since sustainable development encapsulates the compromise between the seemingly irreconcilable aims of economic growth and environmental sustainability, it is perhaps not surprising that the Brundtland definition has been critiqued for being too vague and not elaborating on key elements of the definition, such as “needs” (Castro, 2004, p. 196). Subsequently, some have dismissed the term as meaningless, since it can easily be interpreted as the continuance of existing forms of capital growth, but simply more environmentally conscious and perpetuated on a more global scale (Petrucci, 1998, p. 431). Sustainable development is therefore only considered if it does not conflict with economic goals, and fundamentally focusses on changing the efficiency of producers rather than the wastefulness of consumers (Cohen, 2007, p. 58). The prioritisation of the economy over the environment has been baldly stated by former US President George W. Bush, who noted: “we will be working with our allies to reduce greenhouse gases, but I will not accept a plan

that will harm our economy and hurt American workers” (cited in Burgess, et al., 2003, p. 261). Some have seen this “business as usual” approach in a particularly negative light. One concern is that it is an insensitive imposition of development that is ignorant of the importance of cultural and institutional diversity (Castro, 2004, p. 206). Perhaps a more major point of concern is that resources are distributed through the market, which is seen as a flawed way to achieve social equality and minimise environmental harm (p. 220). Ultimately, capitalism and industrialisation are therefore seen as the root cause of environmental pressures (Burgess, et al., 2003, p. 261).

In addition to being theoretically vague, the technical details regarding scale, depth, and diversity of environmental problems (and how they are to be measured) are not concrete. Several uncertainties contribute to the quandaries of implementing sustainability: whether human life is expected to last indefinitely (Jamieson, 1998, p. 186); which of the 500 efforts at quantitatively assessing sustainability should be used; what should be sustained and developed (Parris & Kates, 2003, p. 559); whether all aspects of sustainability can be quantitatively measured anyway (Boer, Vereijken, & Aiking, 2006, p. 24); and the complication of geographical boundaries (Boer, et al., 2006, p. 48). Each quantitative method of assessment has rather glaring deficiencies, particularly since environmental, social and economic problems are almost always interrelated (p. 25). Some metrics, or indicator sets, such as Life Cycle Analysis (LCA) only have limited scope and usefulness (Boer, et al., 2006, p. 30; Cohen, 2007, p. 59). All these complications have led to the following, rather gloomy, conclusion: “there are no indicator sets that are universally accepted, backed by compelling theory, rigorous data collection and analysis, and influential in policy” (Parris & Kates, 2003, p. 559).

It is perhaps no wonder then that, in practice, governments have found it difficult to implement sustainable initiatives. Their approach has generally focussed on remedying past mistakes rather than mitigating future or present environmental problems (F. Harris, 2004, p. 275). In some cases arguments over the scientific details of a particular environmental effect can stall much needed action, particularly in the case where effects are irreversible or will be incredibly costly even if technology is available to help reverse some of the damage (p. 275). There are also more systemic barriers arising from the neoliberal economic framework that helps determine what is and is not acceptable or desirable in policy formulation.

2.2.2 Neoliberalisation of nature

Neoliberalism more broadly originated from a variety of intellectual roots (see Cerny, 2008; Peck, 2004, p. 400), though the details of these are beyond the purview of this research. However, the global spread of neoliberalisation can be attributed to political institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (along with their financial backers), who have been observed to foist neoliberal policy prescriptions on struggling economies as a condition of granting loans (McCarthy, et al., 2007, p. 7). Ideologically, neoliberal ideas are said to have spread through powerful economic networks and international meetings for political economic leaders (such as the World Economic Forum). What critics see as particularly problematic is that these phenomena no longer seem to be up for debate, because they are seen as inevitable, natural, and simply common sense (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004, p. 276). The strands of neoliberalisation particularly relevant to the sustainability debate are the processes of enclosure, valuation and privatisation, and minimising government intervention in favour of “governance.”

2.2.2.1 *Enclosure, valuation, privatisation*

Neoliberal tendencies towards enclosure, valuation and ultimately privatisation are not necessarily harmful in intent. The principles have been traced to John Locke, whose ideas about nature formed the foundation of neoliberal fundamentals (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004, p. 277). Locke professed that nature without human labour was worthless; that land should be controlled by those who work it; that individuals should rightly accumulate as much land as they could work, and that such property rights should be enforced by the state. This was meant to form a more just, moral alternative to authoritarian feudal systems. Natural resources would theoretically be better protected (from supposed “tragedies of the commons”) via further commodification, the subsequent establishment of property rights, and efficiently allocated through competitive trade and enterprise (ibid). The neoliberalisation of the environment follows from the idea that nature must be increasingly enclosed, priced and privatised, since nature is simply another form of capital. Efficiency was assumed since property owners had incentive to protect productive resources and land (Castro, 2004, p. 205). Perhaps more importantly, neoliberalisation entails the establishment of *new* property rights that ultimately governs everything according to a market rationality, making “nature subject to the highest bidder” (Guthman, 2007, p. 468). The market rationality of neoliberalisation has seen a huge increase in private resource ownership, from water to carbon, or wetlands to genetic information (Bakker, 2010, p. 715).

2.2.2.2 Governance

The other major effect of the neoliberalisation of nature is the way markets become a form of environmental governance in place of governmental regulation, to promise the achievement of contradictory goals such as environmental conservation and economic growth (Bakker, 2010, p. 715). In environmental economics, the roles of government are reduced from direct regulation of industry to setting environmental goals, which the market is seen to fulfil more efficiently (Castro, 2004, p. 203). Such a system is seen to maximise individual freedom (Petrucci, 1998, p. 433). This is desirable, because, according to Gary Becker's *Economic approach to human behaviour*, individuals are assumed to behave as utility maximising, well informed and rational decision makers, hence reinforcing the efficiency of market systems (Becker, 1986, p. 119). This assumption has now been tempered somewhat by major international economic institutions like the World Bank (1992, cited in Castro, 2004, pp. 201-202), who see environmental degradation as a result of poverty, uncertainty and ignorance. These institutions see the poor in the underdeveloped nations as exploiters of the environment due to the poor lacking technical expertise (or imperfect information). Market disruptions by governments and a lack of property rights are also seen by these institutions to slow down productivity and efficiency (Castro, 2004, pp. 201-202). While neoliberal thought and practice is considered to be in a constant state of change, at its roots it is committed to subjecting the environment, and all things within it, to the workings of the market. Yet neoliberalisation does not always simply entail "more market/less state," as Peck (2004, p. 396) points out. Perhaps more importantly, the "*ideological shape* of the state has changed...even if its size has not changed as much as neoliberal reformers would have us believe" (2004, p. 397, emphasis original). Such changes to state rationality are not always uniform, either (p. 401), and more generally state rationality is constantly being "reproduced" (p. 403). Both the processes of privatisation and governance have proved to be hugely problematic in trying to achieve sustainability, as will be discussed in the next section.

2.2.3 Issues with the neoliberalisation of nature

2.2.3.1 *Problems with enclosure, valuation and privatization for sustainability*

One of the earlier and perhaps now most recited critiques of the enclosure, valuation and privatisation of nature (or its "commoditisation") stems from Karl Polanyi's 1944 *The Great Transformation*. In addition to labour and capital, Polanyi noted that land and nature are "fictitious

commodities,” in that they are not actually produced to be bought and sold, despite human attempts to subject them to the workings of the market system (cited in McCarthy & Prudham, 2004, p. 281). It is this rather simple yet un-intuitive point that is the basis of much critique launched at neoliberalisation, whether on practical or moralistic grounds.

Practically, it is often inefficient to either enclose or put a monetary value on nature because it is a collective good (eg. rivers, scenery) whose benefits are shared by many. This often leads to many resources and land being undervalued as both paying and non-paying individuals can reap benefits from them (Blumm, 1992). The "ecological processes in specific bio-physical settings," (Bakker, 2010, p. 720) in all their complexities, make it difficult to ascertain the value of something today, for its more holistic value may not be known until tomorrow (Castro, 2004, p. 205). Arbitrary attempted enclosure "would create fragmented land management...increased spillover costs from incompatible parcels, [and] inestimable difficulties in managing transboundary resources" (Blumm, 1992). Furthermore, in many cases when humans make choices that result in a resource being squandered or an ecosystem unbalanced, the effects can be irreversible (Blumm, 1992; Castro, 2004, p. 205; Okereke, 2008, p. 153). In traditional economic circles, the enclosure, valuation and privatisation of nature are seen to produce more Pareto efficient results, which is "an allocation of the available good in an exchange economy...[where] it is not possible to devise an alternative allocation in which at least one person is better off and no one is worse off" (Nicholson & Snyder, 2012, p. 476). The market is purported to optimise such Pareto efficient results, yet this does not automatically ensure environmental sustainability, therefore on a much grander scale of neoliberalisation, environmental degradation would still be permissible, and indeed does occur (Castro, 2004, p. 205).

Morally, the enclosure, valuation and privatisation of nature is also questionable given that the distribution of wealth would entitle a small minority unprecedented rights to resources (Blumm, 1992). Indeed, such inequity has occurred on a global scale when developing countries are forced to subscribe to neoliberal development whereby "potentials for people's own subsistence are degraded...and the cultures that were built over centuries are also destroyed and substituted by other cultures" (Castro, 2004, p. 218). Thus, while maximising individual freedom is a desirable goal in theory, in practice the exercise of such freedoms by a minority often negatively impact upon the freedoms of the majority (Okereke, 2008, p. 152). This does not just apply in an environmental sense, although a complex ecological web provides a clear metaphor for such ripple effects. Neoliberal proponents may argue that trade in toxic chemicals, for example, is simply a result of individuals or states consensually exercising their rights to engage in trade (Okereke, 2008, p. 154).

However, this simplification glosses over the inevitably negative consequences for powerless (or property-less) individuals who may (and do) live in areas of toxic waste disposal, who are left out (accidentally or intentionally) in such negotiations (pp. 153-154). It is these inevitable problems that have historically provoked national governments to step in and protect their societies (Castro, 2004, p. 205).

2.2.3.2 Problems with depending on the market to achieve sustainability

Though governmental environmental regulation sprung from the poor performance of the market system prior to the 1970s to protect the environment, neoliberalisation entails a necessary (re)embrace of market principles of governance with minimal government intervention (Blumm, 1992). However, this is problematic in that neoliberal environmental governance officially aims to achieve the exact opposite of what the Brundtland Report requires for sustainable development. The report argues for “decisive political action now to begin managing environmental resources,” rather than solely relying on market mechanisms, and promoting different, sustainable values in political and economic structures, all through democratically functioning states (Okereke, 2008, p. 156).

One market-based compromise that seeks to ameliorate eco-unfriendly products without state regulation is green, ethical or sustainable consumption, and the labelling schemes that inevitably accompany it (Black & Cherrier, 2010, p. 438; Cohen, 2007, p. 57). Some have defined ethical consumerism as “consumption decisions that are made on the basis of concerns to do with human rights, environmental sustainability, animal welfare, Fair Trade, or humane working conditions” (Banaji & Buckingham, 2009, p. 1198). More specifically, green labels have been a major market-driven response to the critique of neoliberal environmental governance, attempting to fill in consumers’ lack of information about the environmental costs of products and services while minimising state interference in markets and oversight of polluting practices. The price premiums associated with certain green goods are meant to either internalise the price of the pollution created by a certain good, fund the research that goes into informing and assigning the label, or go towards some sort of off-setting (such as carbon off-setting, for example). These are meant to address some of the pitfalls of the market in environmental governance, in particular, externalities and incomplete information (Blumm, 1992). It has also been encouraged by “civic” websites attempting to engage youth politically, instead of more conventional political action (Banaji & Buckingham, 2009, p. 1199).

Ethical consumption has thus been used as both a remedy for, and recognition of, problems with ignoring environmental externalities.

Ethical consumerism, while perfectly commendable on an individual level, has been argued to present an inadequate response to a much larger problem, both theoretically and in practice. First, giving individual consumers the main decision-making responsibilities of what is fundamentally a collective problem is troubling, since there are many barriers to consuming sustainably (Mont & Plepys, 2007, p. 535). Consumers can be apathetic towards the environment in general or compared to other product attributes (such as aesthetic and social values), have limited knowledge which causes them to be skeptical of green marketing (a problem which cannot be addressed through a label), or simply feel that their individual choice is too insignificant (Schaefer & Crane, 2005, p. 82). Through no fault of their own, consumers are also limited by availability and reliability of both information and “ethical” products (Banaji & Buckingham, 2009, p. 1200). While most people in the US for example know their lifestyles may need to change to protect the environment, they are unclear about what to do to create positive changes due to the sheer complexity and number of actions one can take (Brower & Leon, 1999). This is somewhat understandable given that opposing groups (eg. an industry lobby group vs an environmental NGO) can often find “independent experts” that appear to disagree, reducing public trust in *any* expert advice (Corner & Richardson, 1993, p. 225). Given the increasing politicisation of science, and the abundance of differing “expert” views, it is often impossible for ordinary citizens to trust or heed the advice of environmental scientists (p. 11). It has thus been shown through various studies that public understanding of environmental issues such as global warming are often highly confused (Stamm, Clark, & Eblacas, 2000, p. 220). The existing “green-wash and proliferation of certification schemes have already confused consumers, limiting their willingness to pay the price premiums typically associated with sustainably produced goods (S. Harris, 2007, p. 51). These feelings of uncertainty have been echoed in research on consumers’ reasons for not purchasing ethically, across both developed and developing nations (Devinney, Belk, & Eckhardt, 2010). In an increasingly globalised world, consumers are rarely directly affected or confronted with the consequences of their purchases in a visible way, further exacerbating ignorance and apathy (Hajer, 1997, p. 10). There is also the glaring issue of affordability, in two respects. Since individual households often have more immediate, short-term concerns for basic needs, they often cannot afford to choose to “buy green,” as they have limited time and means (F. Harris, 2004, p. 270). This limits the effectiveness of sustainable consumption on a large enough scale to produce adequate, long-term environmental protection. Indeed, multiple studies have found that “ethical consumption tends to be concentrated among social groups that

are already economically privileged” (Banaji & Buckingham, 2009, p. 1200), thus effectively excluding a large segment of the population and reproducing the very disempowerment that ethical consumption aims to relieve (1201). Since consumption patterns are also affected by habit, it is perhaps overzealous to rely on consumers alone to move towards more sustainable consumption (Schaefer & Crane, 2005, p. 87). While ethical consumerism may positively complement political actions, it would be simplistic and inadequate for such consumer action to replace political action altogether (Banaji & Buckingham, 2009, p. 1202). Even if consumers *were* hypothetically adequately resourced, there are also production-side inadequacies of relying *mainly* on ethical consumerism to achieve sustainability.

It is questionable how effective ethical consumerism currently is on the production side, in terms of practice and efficiency. The price premiums of green products do not often directly ameliorate environmental harm, since they usually go to producers despite the public effects of unsustainable production (Guthman, 2007, p. 460). There are also barriers for producers certification schemes: in practice, “the intent of the standards lead to different foci for verification purposes and, hence, barriers to entry” (p. 462). The growing number of certification schemes (both for- and non- profit) also serve to create multiple rules and rule-making bodies, going against the market ideal of efficiency (p. 467), and increasing costs for producers. This is particularly the case for “organic” goods, for example, where there are multiple certification schemes even within countries. Lastly, there is the constant uncertainty of current science around sustainability, for two reasons. First, environmental problems rarely exist in isolation, and therefore it is difficult to adequately consider interacting or interconnected issues. Second, there is the age old problem of uncertainty about the future. Despite such issues, ethical consumerism has been widely embraced by both industry and environmentalists, and of course, it does have its appeal – as Blumm (1992) notes: “No one likes to be the subject of some government regulation that a faceless bureaucrat enforces.” However, excessive reliance on the market to price and label often obfuscates the potential for non-market methods, reinforcing the misnomer that there is no alternative mechanism to achieve environmental or social stewardship (Guthman, 2007, p. 473). Some have been more explicit in their criticism, stating that “ethical consumption is merely an individualistic strategy that is complicit with neoliberalism...it can reinforce political quietism and apathy” (Banaji & Buckingham, 2009, p. 1201). Such schemes can be reductive in that they distract from the “deeper political and social aspects” of sustainability (Eagan, 2008, p. 41).

2.3 Looking ahead: how sustainability could be conceptualised

2.3.1 Redefining progress

While there is an overwhelming amount of literature critiquing the existing neoliberal solutions to achieving sustainability, there is far less on what sustainability should mean and entail instead. However, in the literature that does exist, there seems to be a major call in critical analyses for a re-orientation away from using economic development as the only yardstick of desired progress, and also changing our relationship with nature. This will likely involve a change in state mentality, which for the last two hundred years has mostly advanced a liberal economic agenda that predominantly defines wellbeing in purely “preference satisfying,” material terms (Okereke, 2008, p. 158). Simply adding “environmental consciousness” to our existing repertoire will not be enough (Shanahan, 1993, p. 182). Buell (1995) encapsulates this position well: “for a truly humanistic economics, the goal must be the flourishing of human beings, and this requires something other than the endless production of material goods...Economic growth is a means and not an end” (p. 45). This will require new, less environmentally harmful ways for us to achieve our social and cultural needs and a shift towards longer term economic considerations (Schaefer & Crane, 2005, p. 87). For example:

there are...types of consumption that may fulfill the same symbolic functions as present-day affluent consumption but with much less material input in terms of sourcing, producing, transporting, and disposing of goods. These include shopping for secondhand goods, shopping in organic and fair-trade shops, or shopping at farmers’ markets, as well as various exchange and hire systems (ibid).

In reorienting our economic system, acting environmentally responsible cannot not be a threat to material survival (Shanahan, 1993, p. 182). The recognition of the symbolic function of goods comes with it a need to look at neoliberalisation and nature differently; namely that nature is conceptualised beyond its instrumental, economic values and relationships to humans (Bakker, 2010, p. 72).

2.3.2 Reducing consumption

While reducing consumption is one of the most important actions needed for a more sustainable world, it has been largely overlooked in policymaking (Kates, 2003, p. 48). The Royal Society of London and the US National Academy of Sciences defined consumption as:

The human transformation of materials and energy. Consumption is of concern to the extent that it makes the transformed materials or energy less available for future use, or negatively impacts biophysical systems in such a way as to threaten human health, welfare, or other things people value. (p. 41)

Kates uses this definition with “the addition of information to energy and matter, thus completing the triad of the biophysical and ecological basics that support life” (2003, p. 41). The fulfilment of human needs and desires has had a major impact on the natural environment (Brower & Leon, 2003; Stern, 2000, p. 408). Despite consumption’s direct implications for sustainability, limited studies have been conducted on reducing consumption compared to the vast literature focussing on increasing or changing it (consisting mostly of marketing research) (Kates, 2003, p. 46). This may be because reducing consumption will require changes that oppose capitalism’s *raison d’être* (p. 47). However, there is a major need to change patterns of consumption for the purposes of sustainability.

Despite technological improvements that attempt to alleviate environmental impacts of consumption (such as hybrid cars), it is unclear whether such improvements will sufficiently address the problems they seek to resolve (Weiss, 1990, p. 7). Technology was also considered one of the key factors contributing to accelerating environmental degradation in the first place (Kates, 2003, p. 37). Technology’s impact on the environment is therefore far from straightforward, especially since, following from short term technological improvements in efficiency, consumption often increases to quickly offset these gains (Cohen, 2007, p. 59; Kates, 2003, p. 43; Mont & Plepys, 2007, p. 531). Per capita consumption has indeed continued to increase alongside population growth (Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 2008). From 1950 to the early 1990s, world population doubled, but grain production and energy use outstripped this (Kates, 2003, p. 42). Considering the world’s population growth cannot be easily stemmed, the other option is to reduce consumption (Schaefer & Crane, 2005, p. 77), although leading scientific reports support a stabilization in both (Speidel, 2003, p. 2). However both governments and industry promote increased consumption for economic prosperity, and consumers’ materialist attitudes towards identity formation and wellbeing make reducing consumption a difficult task (Mont & Plepys, 2007, p. 534; Schaefer & Crane, 2005, p. 78). Reducing consumption thus “calls for the renegotiation of major societal conventions and institutions” (Mont & Plepys, 2007, p. 532).

Lower levels of consumption, particularly in the developed world where consumption is disproportionately high, require several major changes. The way goods and services are marketed,

and the subsequent way societies define what is desirable in an individual, need to re-incorporate environmentally positive values such as thrift and frugality, society-wide (Black, 2010). The term “re-incorporate” is used because such values have successfully inspired populations before – victory gardens in Britain being one example. Market research also needs to acknowledge more macro and structural causes for unsustainable behaviours (Thøgersen, 2010, p. 171), and include social, cultural and political factors (Kilbourne & Carlson, 2008; Schaefer & Crane, 2005, p. 83). Some of the specific factors on unsustainable behaviour deserve much attention (see Stern, 2000, p. 415). There is also a need to design better systems that make it easier or even possible for people to consume less. Individuals do much of the consuming, with end-user consumer demand making up half of economic activity (and more than half in the US) (Cohen, 2007, p. 57). A large part of such consumption occurs according to a culture that sees it as desirable and normal (Schaefer & Crane, 2005, p. 86). More sustainable consumption thus needs to look at both practical methods of reducing wasteful consumption, and provoking thought on how human needs and wants are defined in societies (Cohen, 2007, p. 57).

Media have long been identified as important in informing the public about behaviours that help and hinder environmental sustainability (Alexander, 2002, p. 45). However, merely identifying the factors leading to unsustainable consumption and subsequently condemning those factors has been shown to be ineffective at producing sustainable behaviour on a large enough scale (Kilbourne & Carlson, 2008). Thus, it is perhaps necessary to reconsider the adequacy of regulations placed on marketing and advertising, which have had a huge role to play in “encouraging people to participate in cycles of disposal that represent, on an ecological level, some of the most fundamental crises of contemporary life” (Schaefer & Crane, 2005, p. 88).

2.3.3 Acknowledging and reducing inequality

Inherent in the call for recognising the earth’s limits and subsequently reducing consumption requires also acknowledging and addressing vast inequalities of consumption, which OECD and UN reports are also acknowledging the importance of addressing (Schaefer & Crane, 2005, p. 77). If numerous “ecological footprint” measures are anything to go by, several planet Earths would be necessary if every individual sustained the levels of consumption prevalent in developed countries (Schaefer & Crane, 2005, p. 77; World Wildlife Fund, 2010). These inequalities point to questions of “distribution and equity, precisely the questions that defenders of neoliberalism attempt to dismiss

with assertions of rising tides raising all boats” (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004, p. 279). Schaefer & Crane elaborate:

...those who are enjoying high consumption levels (compared to a worldwide average), regardless of the country in which they may live, have a more significant role to play in terms of limiting individual consumption levels as part of an aggregate effort to limit worldwide material consumption than those with less-than-average consumption levels (2005, p. 78).

However, inequality also exists within developed nations, with former World Bank chief economist Joseph Stiglitz announcing in *Vanity Fair* that inequality had risen to the extent where “1% of Americans are now taking in nearly a quarter of the nation’s income” (2011, p. 1). Warren Buffet, well known as one of the richest men in the world, even asked to be taxed *more* in an op-ed in the *New York Times* (2011, p. A21). Recognising that inequalities exist on a national and global level require a change in mind set of the major international development agencies, who academics and activists have criticised for reproducing inequalities in power and wealth worldwide (Lewis, 2000, p. 247). Sustainable development therefore requires a genuine dedication to fair and equitable distributions of resources and meeting the needs of the world’s least fortunate, to fulfil its core specified goals (Okereke, 2008, pp. 147-148).

Inherent in a call for greater international equity is a recognition of “the positive right to life and to a decent environment” (Okereke, 2008, p. 160). Economic liberals reject redistribution on the basis that it denies wealthier individuals the right to reap rewards which they have laboured for (Okereke, 2008, pp. 158-159). The Brundtland report, as well as scholars who advance global environmental justice, acknowledge the problems with an emphasis on satisfying property owners and the wealthier sectors of society. First, as previously mentioned, the ripple effects of economic interactions are now so globalised that their consequences mostly impact people not involved or consulted in the process of trade. Second, the liberal philosophy ignores the fact that, in order to work and accumulate property rights, one needs to be alive and have some basic means of doing so (ie. decent environmental conditions), whether one is a subsistence farmer or an entrepreneur (Okereke, 2008, p. 160).

2.3.4 Localising sustainability

Though the focus on inequalities may need to be global, many feel that the application of sustainability initiatives must, on the contrary, be much more localised, contextualised, and specific.

Jamieson (1998) gives particularly pertinent reasons for such specificity. Sustainability in general is rather complex, hence looking at a particular place helps ground discussions in a contextual setting that people in the area can relate to directly. Subsequently, it also clarifies the trade-offs that may be necessary when discussing a particular place (p. 188). Framing sustainability discussions in such a localised way also acknowledges the particular “geo-cultural and bio-social contexts” of each locale. While international agreements will no doubt be necessary, the policies that they conjure will need to be sensitive to local particularities (Petrucci, 1998, p. 432). In the process of such policymaking, geographically-specific media will have a significant role to inform and empower citizens to make more sustainable political choices.

3 Media's sustainability discourse

The media supplies much of the information people read about environmental issues (Hansen, 2010, p. 161; Sakellari & Skanavis, 2007, p. 236), especially since the issues are so scientifically complex and many citizens cannot usually freely access scientific journals (Wilson, 2000, p. 200). The relative emphasis the media place on environmental issues also may affect how important the issues are perceived to be (Howard-Williams, 2009, p. 49). Therefore it is necessary to acknowledge the multi-faceted ways the media interacts with society to understand the importance of political blogs within the wider media landscape.

3.1 Media and democracy

Mass communication scholars generally consider that the mass media's role, particularly in news production, is meant to support a representative, liberal-democratic society by informing citizens so that they can optimally exercise their political will (Cottle, 1993, p. 109). This role invokes Jürgen Habermas' idea of the "public sphere," "a realm of social life in which citizens can come together as a rational body, in which general interests can be discussed, debated and decided upon" (Cottle, 1993, p. 109). The public sphere relied upon three "operating rules":

- (1) Anybody can participate in the discussion; (2) Every participant can raise any question, make any assertion, or express any feeling; and (3) No interference with another's participation is allowable (Cooper, 2006, pp. 278-279).

Providing the participants were "competent" speakers, and contributions were "constructive," the ideal public sphere would naturally produce a consensus based on the most rational ideas (p. 279). John Dewey also emphasised that democracy should be viewed as conversational and deliberative, moving populations toward consensus (cited in Alterman, 2008). Media plays an important role in explaining what is going on in multiple levels of community, without which it would be difficult to understand local, national or international politics (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p. 6). However, news media provide more than just information – they draw on, and perhaps also contribute to, popular cultural understandings of the environment, by appealing to the symbolic and the emotional (Cottle, 1993, pp. 126-127). While the public sphere may reflect an ideal of what the media *should* constitute, observations of the actual media industry show that commercial interests are prioritised over imperatives to informing the public (Cottle, 1993, p. 110). The "public sphere" in reality is

perhaps more like the “pseudo-public sphere” that Habermas dreaded, where the media caters to a “culture consuming” society by appealing to citizens as consumers (Cottle, 1993, p. 128).

Despite the media’s importance in shaping beliefs, values, and behaviour, there is no predictable, simple “effect” that it has on audiences: social context is all important, and in the case of the environment, problems surfaced long before the existence of mass media (Shanahan, 1993, p. 186). Hall’s (2001) encoding-decoding model, which asserts the variance of meaning that can be gleaned from individuals with different socio-political backgrounds and identities, remains relevant here. A helpful example of this is an analogy by Corner and Richardson: “television programmes do not contain meaning but act as dense and complex cues for its production” (1993, p. 222). Johnson’s circuit of communication builds on this by pointing to some factors that *affect* media *effects* and how meaning is created: class, gender, ethnicity, and age (1986, cited in A. Anderson, 1997, pp. 192-193). Significant individuals and institutions in society such as the schooling system all contribute to an individual’s values, identity and beliefs (Kenix, 2011, p. 139). Ethnographic research also notes the importance of personal and local life on the process of opinion formation and meaning-making (Burgess & Harrison, 1993, p. 218; Hansen, 2010, p. 161). Yet, according to Gerbner’s “cultivation” theory, the cumulative effect of the media is likely to garner audience acceptance of the intended meanings by shaping cultural understandings that most people use to process their vision of reality (1990, p. 249, cited in A. Anderson, 1997, p. 29). There are “diverse chains of influence which characterise the media’s role and function in society” (Hansen, 2010, p. 159). In any study of media, it is therefore crucial to acknowledge that audiences will not necessarily have uniform understandings or reactions towards the text analysed (Corner & Richardson, 1993, p. 228).

3.2 Political media

Politics is one of the key tools which citizens use to make sense of media meanings, their own sense of identity within a community, and what is societally desirable (Olsen & March, 1989, p. 48). As a process of making choices, politics helps determine the “purpose, direction, and belonging” of an individual within society, and thus is a space of learning and entrenching a set of values and experiences that shape conceptions of reality (ibid). Despite its importance, the last few decades have seen a decline in political participation, whether one looks at voting percentages or contact with representatives (Pole, 2009, pp. 3-4). Media coverage of politics has been found to exacerbate “political apathy, cynicism, and quiescence, rather than active citizenship and participation” (W. Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992). However communicating politics is still largely

controlled by media (p. 5), who help to define what is normal and appropriate, thus building “the framework within which politics takes place” (Wright & Kurian, 2010, p. 400). The Brundtland Report mentions that political action is necessary to manage environmental resources and promote sustainable political economic structures (Okereke, 2008, p. 156). As an institution that helps develop society’s sense of purpose and direction, political media deserves analysis so that the consequences of these dominant value systems can be considered in light of the greater need to move toward a more sustainable world (Wright & Kurian, 2010, p. 399). In any analysis of media however, it is also important to acknowledge the politics that shape the media.

3.3 Commercial media

Commercial media, which comprise most mainstream media organisations, depend on advertising for their survival, and subsequently their content generally focuses on furthering the interests of industry (Howard-Williams, 2009, p. 11), or at least not antagonising their sponsors (Hansen, 2010, p. 94). Advertising comprises the majority or totality of media revenue, hence why media organisations are said to principally sell audiences to advertisers, with content being mere “bait to lure audiences and expose them to ads” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p. 64). Advertising-funded media tends to produce content to desirable consumer markets, especially higher socio-economic ones (Kenix, 2005), which glosses over major inequalities in the ability to afford environmentally-friendly products. Mainstream commercial media also prioritises industry’s analysis and insistence on supporting consumer choice in global warming news coverage (Wilkins, 1993, p. 77), emphasising the use of technological progress in fixing environmental issues such as global warming (p. 80). Since journalists are often under commercial pressure, is it often advertisers that can shape the “formation of the news beat,” (Lowrey, 2006, p. 496), whether explicitly (such as through lifestyle advertorials) or implicitly (such as encouraging green consumption as a remedy for an environmental problem). As profit-maximising entities, media organisations’ pressure on journalists to increase productivity has also led to a concerning reliance on press releases as opposed to crafting their own fact-checked content. These press releases are overwhelmingly produced by large businesses and governments who have the resources to hire PR professionals (Hansen, 2010, p. 87). The potentially negative effects that such commercialisation may have on the media’s informative functions have produced a vast literature examining environmental media coverage.

3.3.1 Sustainability and the environment in mainstream media

Broadly speaking, environmental problems have been found to be sporadically and inconsistently covered by the mainstream media, often hidden amongst major tabloid-type stories, and with little attempt to connect issues and give a grand picture (Alexander, 2002, p. 45; Sabine, 1998, p. 175). Commercial media, however, are not the only perpetrators of this trend: Cottle's study of over 1,799 news stories from BBC1 and ITV found that only 4.3% of stories were related to the environment, with relatively little difference between the networks (1993, p. 114). However, a New Zealand based study did find some counter hegemonic views on a non-commercial channel that did differ from the coverage on commercial channels (Howard-Williams, 2009, p. 97). The environment's insignificance in the mainstream media is further highlighted by the lack of a dedicated "environment" section in many of the leading news organisations in developed nations, giving the impression that it is less important than topics such as sport or entertainment. At the time this thesis is being written, a dedicated "environment" category for news is not present on many major US and New Zealand news websites. Reuters, one of the world's largest news organisations, has categories for "markets," "business," and "money" on its main menu, but not the environment. The *New York Times* has a main category for "style" (referring to fashion news), but not the environment. In New Zealand, only one mainstream news website (3news.co.nz) currently has a section on the environment. In part, the minute and deprioritised coverage can be attributed to the fact that environmental events do not fit into established news values. Major natural disasters aside, most environmental issues are long-term and complex, making them difficult to justify covering (Burgess & Harrison, 1993, p. 199). Since news is often also event-driven, the relative invisibility of many environmental problems further contributes to their lack of coverage (Hansen, 2010, pp. 95-96). However, the problem with mainstream environmental media coverage does not stop at its quantity.

When the media do cover environmental issues, research has shown it is predominantly from a consumerist angle. When environmental stories are covered from an individualist angle, they often appear as human interest stories (Valenti, 2003, p. 382), stories concerning everyday consumption and leisure activities (Cottle, 1993, p. 129), and/or green consumption possibilities (Lockie, 2006, p. 321). In the rise in ethical or green products like organic food, the media play a role in distinguishing sustainable from unsustainable through consumption choices (Lockie, 2006, p. 321). This individualised answer to achieving, or not achieving sustainability, is also used by the media when assigning blame for environmental problems. The *personal* attributes (such as stubbornness) of

leaders or important individuals are generally blamed for the failure of certain environmental initiatives, rather than the *systemic* constraints that may affect that individual's decisions (Brodscholl, 2003, p. 49;55). News about environmental disasters has also been shown to blame isolated entities for the problems, rather than examining the potential economic or political policies or systems that guide those entities in their decision making (Wilkins, 1993, p. 74). These frames run parallel to neoliberal values of championing the market and the individual in problem solving and decision making.

The media's framing of "sustainable development" also amounted to the widely held assumption that economic growth was the route to improving both environmental protection and human lives, consistent with neoliberal championing of the market (Lewis, 2000, p. 255). When environmental issues were looked at systemically, many of the stories discussed market mechanisms for solving environmental problems (Välvirronen & Hellsten, 2002, p. 230), and continued to equate economic growth as the main form of progress (Lewis, 2000, p. 269). Critiques of this assumption were very rarely covered, as most of the arguments in the media focussed on technical details. Many of the critiques also did not challenge the assumption, but offered accommodating strategies like education, and NGO action (p. 266). The media's economic growth frames consequently, although not always intentionally, support their key sponsors - industry (Jucker, 2002). For example, Välvirronen & Hellsten (2002, p. 239) looked at coverage of the Rio summit, noting that discussions around environmental problems were dominated by industries. Many studies have also found that, despite journalists being sympathetic to environmental pressure groups, these groups were rarely used as sources. Government, scientists and industry are predominantly used as sources, except in climate change stories (Hansen, 2010, pp. 85-86). Unofficial opinion still had a voice in the mainstream media, but in the letters to the editor as opposed to the actual news (p. 79). The mainstream media therefore usually define sustainability in ways that support the already powerful economic elite and existing power relations. The relative importance of media narratives in defining sustainability and subsequent coverage give rise to apathy and confusion about the requirements of a more sustainable world. Mainstream media's emphasis of material progress through technology and production over other values and activities in life has been characterised by Pirages and Ehrlich (1974) as the 'dominant social paradigm' (cited in Shanahan, 1993, p. 185). Particularly concerning is that belief in the dominant social paradigm has shown to be negatively correlated with environmental concern (Dunlap & Van Liere, 1984). It is therefore important to look at alternative forms of media that may effectively challenge existing media representations that act to reinforce the status quo.

3.4 The online environment and the environment online

Given the vast number of studies already concerned with commercial media's framing of the environment, it may be pertinent to examine how independent non-commercial media sources frame sustainability issues, as a potential alternative to existing dominant framings. One emerging and heralded source of independent non-commercial media is the Internet, particularly in the form of blogging.

3.4.1 Internet and blogs

The Internet is fast becoming a major news and information source for individual users, journalists and major media organisations (Gunter, Campbell, Touri, & Gibson, 2009), and thus has become "a key part of social, economic and cultural life in many societies" (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009, p. 562). It is so important that the UN declared Internet access a human right in June 2011 (Olivarez-Giles, 2011). Empirical evidence suggests that Internet users generally trust established media outlets online more than independent sources for their news (Gunter, et al., 2009). However, at the same time, many journalists and political elites are increasingly perusing online sources, particularly blogs (Farrell & Drezner, 2008, p. 15), and in some cases, using them as first-hand sources (Ofcom, 2007), especially for opinion/editorial pieces (Schiffer, 2006). However some studies note that the Internet is used by journalists mainly for background information and inspiration for stories, as online information is still treated with some distrust (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009, pp. 568-569). Yet it is still difficult to deny the importance of emerging media online, particularly blogs.

Due to its increasing importance, researchers have flocked to study the Internet to study both uniquely online behaviours and as a way to study human behaviour more generally (Stewart & Mann, 2000, p. 5), with this new "era" of research largely portraying the Internet in a positive light. The interactivity online purportedly:

gives people a voice and connects users directly without professionals or gatekeepers in between. Internet technologies are democratic tools in principle that serve people's everyday needs, rather than those of special interest groups or the market's (Christians & Chen, 2004, p. 19).

However, every technology is a product of social influences, and thus the Internet, emerging in a capitalist society, has been designed according to capitalist values, most of all economic efficiency (Feenberg, 1995, cited in Hands, 2011, p. 39). The potential for social change therefore needs to

come from the ability to redefine end goals from efficiency and profit-maximisation and to reshape the problematic logic underpinning it (Hands, 2011, p. 40). Yet, as Hands emphasises: “the fact that technology could still be used in a way that challenges the majority practice testifies to the possibility of at least beginning the process of democratic technological change” (2011, p. 40).

Another limitation of the Internet more generally as a "revolutionary" medium that gives readers and independent writers more power is inequality of access (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009, p. 575), with Internet penetration worldwide sitting at 33% (Internet World Stats, 2011). Even within the US, 5-10% of Americans are unable to access Internet fast enough to perform basic functions, such as saving an image (McHugh, 2011). Increasingly sophisticated online censorship in countries with poor press freedom has accompanied the rise of online media (CPJ, 2011). Internationally, only one sixth of the world's population actually live in a country considered to have a "free press" according to Freedom House, a US group that tracks human rights worldwide (Ide, 2011). On the other hand, in the same study, Freedom House also found that Internet press freedom is fairly equal among free and repressive states, and in repressive states, the Internet still provides a much freer space than the press. While this study looks at online content in New Zealand and the US, it should also be acknowledged that these two regions comprise a small global number of total Internet users compared to Asia and Europe, however North America and Oceania/Australia have the highest penetration rates (Internet World Stats, 2011). Thus, blogs from the US and New Zealand were of particular interest for this study.

3.4.1.1 Development of blogging

Blogs have been increasingly researched, since they are now considered “a mainstream form of communication on the Internet,” (Koop & Jansen, 2009, p. 155). Blogs are basically a type of website where “posts” by blog writers (“bloggers”) are listed in reverse chronological order (Sprague, 2007, p. 128). Many allow readers to post “comments” on each post (ibid), and some blog formats have increasingly intricate feedback mechanisms, which allow you to reply to specific comments (Steyn, Boshoff, Heerden, & Pitt, 2008, p. 39), and/or even rate comments (see, for example, blog.greens.org.nz). Central to blogs are the hyperlinks to other websites which lend those websites credibility in official ranking websites and search engines, and bring attention to external sources. These capabilities have contributed to their increasing influence in business and politics (see Kenix, 2009, p. 793; Pole, 2009; Sprague, 2007, p. 130). While the participatory, interactive potential of the Internet and blogs may be seen as a revolutionary way for individuals to influence mainstream

media stories and “reinvigorate civic engagement” (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009, p. 575), there are obvious limitations. Some blogs speak louder than others in that a small number of bloggers dominate much of the blogosphere traffic (Farrell & Drezner, 2008, p. 16). Furthermore, bloggers still rely heavily on mainstream reports to base their content on, and they do not have access to the same level of resources that journalists do (Lowrey, 2006, p. 490).

Despite the aforementioned drawbacks of blogs, the recognition, readership, and subsequent significance of blogs have increased dramatically in the last decade. According to a survey conducted by Synovate (2007), 80% of Americans knew what blogs were, and about half had visited them, despite the fact that a few years earlier, few Americans knew what a blog was. In New Zealand, there have been claims that “the role of journalists has been challenged, perhaps even marginalised, by the rise of bloggers, citizen journalists and other amateurs” (Maharey, 2012, n.p). With the readership of blogs increasing, advertising has also followed (Synovate, 2007, n.p). A majority (65%) of those surveyed indicated they read blogs for opinions (as a type of information), with the next largest category (26%) reading blogs because they wanted to learn more about their interests (as a reason for reading) (ibid). Opinions expressed on blogs have been argued to have a real effect on readers' views of corresponding issues, which makes the discourses they circulate particularly worthy of study (Hewitt, 2005, cited in Jha, 2008).

Blogs are a space for political information to be expressed and exchanged, and subsequently both the scholarly and popular press have hinted at the more democratic potential of blogs (Walker, 2006, pp. 1-2). This is especially the case with users becoming content creators, thus challenging the mainstream media's formerly exclusive role as gatekeeper of information (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009, pp. 571-572). Blogs in part also developed to elaborate on topics that were being neglected by mainstream journalists and provide discursive spaces lacking in traditional media. According to Lowrey (2006), these included “partisan expression, ‘old stories’, stories driven by non-elite sources, and highly specialized content” (p. 477). The purpose of studying environmental content online therefore also seeks to “shed new light on the character and determinants of audience agency” in media studies theories (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009, p. 578), and to determine how (or if) political blogs may be useful as hubs of progressive and democratic sustainable discourse and deliberation.

Another reason blogs are worthy of study for this research is that sustainability topics have been found to be increasingly discussed online via discussion boards and blogs (PR Newswire, 2009). By

the end of 2008, more than 70% of those mentioning sustainability topics in the study displayed concern for the environment, and almost half were changing their behaviour to reflect these concerns (ibid). This increase in behavioural change was paralleled by a rise in "activist" blogging, the practice of directly stimulating behavioural change, in 2008. Online commentary from those who were skeptical about the environment declined from 22% (early 2007) to just 3% (late 2008) (ibid). Sustainability blog *Treehugger* achieved a mention in *Time.com*'s First annual Blog Index (McNichol, 2008), and its popularity even led to the Discovery company acquiring the site in 2007 (Hill, 2007).

3.4.1.2 *Blogs as resistive?*

The struggles of social and environmental movements opposing neoliberal reforms deserve more attention (Heynen & Robbins, 2005, p. 7). Given that blogs and discourse online may be environmentally progressive, it is worth evaluating the discourses they are promulgating in more detail, especially the extent to and ways in which they may negotiate or challenge the neoliberalisation of sustainability. This assumption is based on a growing literature covering the relationship between journalism and blogs (see, for example, Leaning, 2011). As an indication of the importance of political blogs' in mainstream news for example, Reuters developed "Global Voices" in 2006, working with a network of bloggers who would comment on their news wire services (Matheson & Allan, 2007, p. 10). Political blogs also act as mediators between public and media agendas (Tomaszeski, 2006, p. 48). Some of the key themes from the literature are that blogs can be a space for unconventional journalism, challenge corporate journalism, and can be a space for democratic and participatory political interaction (Leaning, 2011, pp. 92-93; Matheson, 2004, p. 451). Indeed, political bloggers, despite starting their blogs with fairly intrinsic, individualistic goals, develop more extrinsic, public motivations for blogging: "to provide an alternative perspective to the mainstream media," "to inform," and "to influence public opinion" (Ekdale, Namkoong, Fung, & Perlmutter, 2010, p. 224). However, others challenge the transformative potential of blogs, given existing media and social practices (Leaning, 2011, pp. 92, 95-96). This study does not seek to take either side, and instead looks at a key practice, advertising, that is at the root of the debate and examines its effect on a certain section of the political blogosphere.

Due to the recent increase in advertising-sponsored news sites and blogs (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009, p. 565), it is pertinent to compare the discourses in advertising-funded vs advertising-free blogs. Partly due to the fact that blogs are often financially independent and uncensored, they are often still seen by audiences as increasingly trustworthy, while the mainstream

media lose trust (Hewitt, 2005, cited in Jha, 2008). Research has also suggested content style that is relevant and relatable to an individual reader will be judged to be more credible, even if the style is informal (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009, p. 449). Therefore while blogs may have smaller readerships than mainstream sources, their influence over readers should not be downplayed. It is therefore important to distinguish between different types of blog given the strong criticism of the transformative nature of blogs by many scholars due to “limitations imposed by commercial interests upon online communication that restrict and challenge open debate” (Leaning, 2011, p. 96).

While bloggers do not always rely on their content for income, they can still be susceptible to commercial pressures much like the average journalist. Commercialism can present itself through implicit, taken-for-granted individualism and consumerism (Sima & Pugsley, 2010, p. 287), or be more overt: companies are not just creating their own blogs, but the rise of web marketing has seen many bloggers being paid to endorse companies (Burns, 2006; Sprague, 2007, pp. 130-132). Sponsorship can be more subtle, however, with fashion bloggers receiving gifts from fashion labels or cookware brands supplying products for food bloggers to give away to readers to increase traffic. One survey of over a hundred influential Asia-Pacific bloggers found that over half had been contacted by PR professionals (Steyn, et al., 2008, p. 41). PR companies have “hired” political bloggers to create positive buzz about certain brands, and have even created fictional characters that blog (Lovink, 2008, p. 9). These phenomena are a difficult compromise at times, as blogs are considered by readers and writers alike as promulgators of social recognition and credibility rather than cash cows (Sprague, 2007, p. 132). Yet there is no denying that blogs can be valuable as the audiences that follow them are more segmented, and such “targeted media products” are particularly attractive to advertisers (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p. 75).

Given the growth of an increasingly diverse blogosphere, it may be worth distinguishing between advertising-funded and financially independent blogs. This is especially the case given that profitability and commercial interest are touted to have such a strong influence over content (Kenix, 2011, p. 125). It is also worth distinguishing between blogs that are advertising-funded and those that are not due to the increase in the sheer number and diversity of blogs, which may defy generalised conclusions (Barlow, 2007, p. 175). While many blogs are basically a personal journal (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009, pp. 573-574), this thesis will decidedly focus on political blogs, due to their popularity, culture of free dialogue and collaboration that attempts to defy commercial co-opting (Sprague, 2007, p. 134). Elite political bloggers in the US are also highly motivated to

provide an alternative perspective to mainstream media in their content (Ekdale, et al., 2010, pp. 224-226). However, it is acknowledged that not all blogs should inherently be considered "alternative" to mainstream media environmental discourse, given the increasing commercialisation of blogs. Given past studies of news blogs and the comments left on many of them, it should also be acknowledged that, despite their potential as a Habermasian public sphere, some are more of a "neighborhood bar" (L. Kenix, 2009, p. 808). Thus, this seeks to uncover the way these bloggers must balance "unbridled and honest commentary" with companies' desires to promote themselves through advertising on the blog (Sprague, 2007, p. 135).

Through the examination of blog discourse, this study also seeks to elaborate upon the alleged challenges that the blogosphere poses to dominant ideologies and discourses in the mainstream media, and the limits of these challenges. Specifically, it hopes to examine what such challenges actually constitute. This involves distinguishing between different extents of resistive activism. Joss Hands (2011, pp. 4-5) notes these different forms, illustrated in :

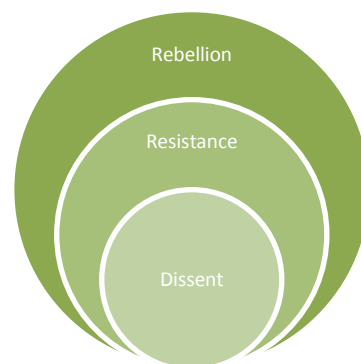


Figure 3.1 Forms of resistive activism

Dissent is described as disagreement prefaced with acceptance of the wider system. Resistance takes dissent a step further by refusing acceptance and compliance, thereby limiting the scope of power of authority. Rebellion includes resistance, and in addition seeks an active change of situation on behalf of others, through their approval and thus collective cooperation. The diagram illustrates the necessity of dissent and resistance in rebellion, but not rebellion in dissent. However, these forms of activism are not always easily distinguishable, "they are simply perspectives on different dialectical moments of struggle" (Hands, 2011, p. 6).

Evaluating the capabilities of current affairs blogs in these more specific ways will hopefully shed light on both their potential and limitations in producing social and environmental change. Pole's

(2009, p. 2) research on political blogs for example leads her to argue that blogs at least offer opportunities (that are not as well articulated in mainstream media) to influence politics in more action-oriented ways, particularly in the case of formerly underrepresented groups. Furthermore, while some researchers have found that political or news blogs rarely offer original news (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009, p. 573), they may have a role in helping readers to interpret events and stories in certain (potentially different) ways. Yet on the other hand, political blogs can also be created by those deeply entrenched in existing circles of the political elite, such as *Kiwi Blog* (included in our sample), which is written by a former political advisor to one of the two largest New Zealand political parties (Kenix, 2011, p. 6). It is therefore important not to engage in a reductive analysis based purely on technical labels for any particular kind of media, and take the context of the writers and the nature of their content into consideration. These considerations will be taken into account in the mixed methods research approach adopted for this thesis, discussed in the next chapter.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research questions

While there is *potential* for the blogosphere to herald alternative sustainability discourses and start forums that challenge aspects of neoliberalism, this literature review shows that there is a lack of research actually demonstrating how blog content is different from mainstream content. Thus, the research questions that guide this thesis aim to be very open ended, given the uncertainty of this continually evolving medium:

1. What are the key ways in which environmental sustainability is discussed by political bloggers?
2. How is neoliberalism situated within bloggers' discourse about environmental sustainability, if at all?
3. What are the differences, if any, in how advertising-present and advertising-free blogs discuss environmental sustainability?
4. How might political blogs facilitate unique discussions about sustainability?

Discourse analysis will be used to answer these questions, with content analysis of blog posts used to add quantitative support to the answers of the first question.

4.2 Sampling

This study looked at “popular” political blogs under the categories of interest, with popularity determined quantitatively depending on size of readership and the influence of the blog on the wider blogosphere. Popularity was expressed by how many links direct to the blog (Mishne & Glance, 2006), consistent with past research (Walker, 2006, p. 4).

4.2.1 Advertising-present

The leading blog ranking website Technorati was used to find the most-read blogs to study. While it should be acknowledged that Technorati is by no means a perfect tool, it is still fairly authoritative (Leaning, 2011, p. 90). Since Technorati has a “green” blogs category, the sample of popular blogs was taken from this category. Technorati’s “green” blogs do not just cover the environment. Many are political blogs which simply contain “green” topics (such as *Huffington Post*). Technorati ranks blogs according to their “authority,” which is determined by a mixture of “linking

behavior, categorization and other associated data over a short, finite period of time" (Technorati, n.d.). Less technically speaking, "authority" is increased when another blog links to the blog in question, giving it a sense of value (Matheson, 2005, p. 165). Considering "green blogs" as classified by Technorati comprise only 0.6% of all the blogs in its directory, it was pertinent not to focus exclusively on green blogs, but green blogs which are also ranked in the general top 100. These green blogs also covered politics, which suited this study focussed on analysing political blogs.

In May 2011, the following blogs in the top three of the "green blogs" category, which were also ranked in the overall top 100, were:

Table 4.1 Top three blogs in the "green blogs" AND top 100, with advertising, according to Technorati ranking

Green ranking ¹	Blog name/url	Other categories	Advertising from:
2	Grist.org	Politics	Businesses
3	ThinkProgress.org	Politics; US Politics	Businesses
4	HuffingtonPost.com	Entertainment; Business; Sports; Politics; Living; US Politics; World	Businesses

Alexa, which ranks websites according to unique visitors and pageviews (Alexa, n.d.), provides statistics by country (unlike Technorati), so the top three blogs in New Zealand according to Alexa were selected. Alexa was not used for selection of the US sample however because of the much larger number of websites one would have to examine before finding an appropriate blog. While the NZ blogs are predominantly political blogs, like the US blogs they also contain content related to the natural environment. A brief search was conducted to ensure there was at least some environmentally related content. The top three blogs on the date of searching (May 4-5, 2011) were:

¹ These numbers indicate the position the blogs occupied on the "Green blogs" list. Blogs that were not in the general top 100 were omitted.

Table 4.2 Top three New Zealand political blogs with advertising, according to Alexa and Technorati

Alexa Ranking ²	NZ Technorati Ranking ³	Blog name/url	Advertising from:
95	617	Kiwi Blog.co.nz	Google; Businesses through Scoop media
146	15871	gotcha.co.nz	Google; Businesses; Causes
173	1086	thestandard.org.nz	Businesses; Causes (they call them "public service advertisements")

A google search of "top New Zealand political blogs" was also conducted to more holistically assess the ranking of these New Zealand blogs, given the ephemeral nature of blogs. A post from the blog *Half Done* (2009) ranked New Zealand political blogs according to Alexa's international and New Zealand ranking score. The above three blogs were still in the top five most popular positions according to these rankings, indicating a relatively long-term popularity. *NZ Blogosphere* blog (Selwyn, 2009) also ranked political blogs in 2009, with the above three blogs in their top five. What was interesting is that all three blogs have increased in their Alexa rankings since 2009 according to the two blog rankings found from *Half Done* and *NZ Blogosphere*.

All six of the blogs selected were labelled "advertising-present" in this study, in the sense that they contained advertising beyond what the blog hosting websites place, indicating both a large enough audience to attract advertisers and a willingness to derive some income through advertising on their blogs.

² These numbers indicate the position these blogs occupy on the list of most popular New Zealand websites (not just blogs).

³ These numbers indicate the position the blogs occupied on the general Technorati list. Blogs that were not in the general top 100 were omitted.

4.2.2 Advertising-free

Less popular blogs were searched (as determined by a larger number in Alexa or Technorati ranking), to obtain some advertising-free blogs to study for comparative purposes. This was more feasible for New Zealand blogs, as there are comparatively fewer, so all advertising-free blogs selected were from within New Zealand. Furthermore, no other American advertising-free blogs were chosen from the Technorati database that were both in the top 100 and green section, as these were all advertising-present (except for the White House blog, an official US government blog). Blogs written by existing MPs were not counted in this study, because this examination of advertising-free blogs was interested in studying whether the discourses in blogs written by *independent* individuals (who may not be restrained as representatives of a political party, and therefore the political elite) are different to the most popular blogs (which in this sample were generally written by those in the political elite, such as *Kiwi Blog*). Blogs that contained advertising to businesses were omitted, including any blogs that chose to advertise through another agency (eg. Scoop). Again this is for the purposes of comparison between more professional, advertising-present blogs and blogs who are completely advertising free, and therefore have no restraints on what they may be able to write due to participation in, or representation of, a political party. Blogs with advertising exclusively to non-profit causes were included, as these are not commercial entities (eg. No Right Turn). These criteria resulted in the selection of the blogs shown in Table 4.3:

Table 4.3 Top six New Zealand political blogs without commercial advertising, according to four ranking criteria

Alexa NZ Ranking	Technorati Ranking	NZ Blogosphere Ranking ⁴	Half Done Ranking ⁵	Rankings multiplied	Blog name	Advertising from:
587	1485	14	13	158648490	Home Paddock	None

⁴ These numbers indicate the position these blogs occupy on the list of most popular New Zealand political blogs, according to <http://www.nzblogosphere.blogspot.co.nz/>

⁵ These numbers indicate the position these blogs occupy on the list of most popular New Zealand political blogs, according to <http://www.nzblogosphere.blogspot.co.nz/>

513	1582	8	6	38955168	No Minister	None
1694	1259	11	9	211141854	No Right Turn	Causes
611	2887	27	8	381014712	NZ Conservative	None
858	3406	4	10	116893920	Cactus Kate	None
423	1527	6	8	31004208	The Dim-Post	None

The six blogs above were chosen because they have the lowest multiplied ranking numbers. The lower the ranking number, the more popular and authoritative the blog is, according to Technorati. Alexa and Technorati rankings were taken at 1:30pm, 17th August 2011. To account for a slightly more historical ranking, the *Tumeke* and *Half Done* rankings were included. These blogs were labelled as “advertising-free.”

Table 4.4 The twelve blogs chosen for analysis

Advertising-present	Advertising-free
Grist.org	HomePaddock.wordpress.com
ThinkProgress.org	NoMinister.blogspot.com
HuffingtonPost.com	NoRightTurn.blogspot.com
Kiwi Blog.co.nz	NZConservative.blogspot.com
WhaleOil.co.nz	Cactus Kate – AsianInvasion2006.blogspot.com
TheStandard.org.nz	DimPost.wordpress.com

4.2.3 Blog post sample

Due to the fact that most of the blogs in this study do not exclusively cover sustainability topics (with the exception of *Grist*), each blog will be searched for posts that contain the term “sustainability.” On some blogs the term “sustainability” last appeared as far back as 2009, whereas for others it appeared in posts several weeks before the search date. Therefore the most recent (as of the date of beginning data collection) ten posts will be included in the content analysis, in addition to the qualitative discourse analysis. If there are not ten posts, the search will be expanded to “sustainable” (with non-environmental posts omitted from the analysis), then “environmental” (with non-natural environment related posts omitted from the analysis). Due to the other topics associated with the terms “environment” (eg. “working environment”) and “green” (eg. “Green party”), these terms will only be searched if there are not enough posts about “sustainability”, which presents some limitations. Some relevant posts may be missed, and it would certainly be useful to compare posts that used the different terms. However, considering the limitations of time and the varying search result formats on each blog, addressing these potential gaps will need to be the work of future researchers.

4.3 Online observation

A two-week observation of the political blogs (not of the posts only in the sample, but of all the blogs’ regular daily output) will be conducted prior to the following quantitative and qualitative analyses. In this thesis, “observation” refers to what danah boyd calls “participant observation” and “deep hanging out” (2007, p. 120). Long-term relationships with communities are not necessarily established, but observation of, and participation in a specific group, complement the content and textual analysis (Burgess & Harrison, 1993, p. 201). Sections of the blog sample will be read daily for a period of two weeks as a matter of pure interest; including posts, comments and linked articles. Comments will be left where compelling. The blog sample will include the three advertising-present American blogs and three advertising-free New Zealand blogs (*No Right Turn*, *Cactus Kate*, and *Dim-Post*) to allow for sufficient time to read each blog daily.

The central aim of conducting the observation is to better understand how political blogs, facilitate unique discussions about sustainability, thus helping to answer the fourth research question in a context-sensitive way. The observation aims to fulfil three purposes. First, it will give me, as a researcher of political blogs, a natural sense of some basic common practices and etiquette in political blogging, and more specifically, the sample used in this study. As past research of

informal online political discussion has warned, “where content is created by the users themselves, the use of language is very different...informal web texts are typically...highly contextualised, depending on rich background of shared knowledge and assumptions” (Malouf & Mullen, 2008, p. 178). This observational study therefore aims to ensure the following studies are relevant and sensitive to the idiosyncrasies, context and culture of the particular political blogs studied. The observation also hopes to gain an in depth appreciation of the personal backgrounds of the content creators (bloggers), which again may result in a more contextualised analysis. Since blogs are generally accepted as a site of expressing personal opinion, this consideration of personal background is particularly relevant as there are fewer obligations to hide one’s personality for the sake of journalistic “objectivity.” The observation study also follows from the acknowledgement in media and cultural studies of the importance of studying people within their natural settings (Burgess & Harrison, 1993, p. 200), thus giving context to conclusions made. “People” because in the case of these blogs, both content producers and audiences (through the comments) are observed. While some have written about their own experiences blogging on environmental issues (see, for example, Lambert, 2009), the blogosphere is incredibly diverse, and therefore immersing oneself in the *specific* area one wishes to study will be more illuminating than formulating conclusions based on a mixture of past studies and brief analysis of blog content only.

The second aim of the observational study is to give a more accurate idea of what to be searching for in the other studies, such as coding categories that should be included or any that may be redundant for this sample. For example, some blog researchers found that it was sometimes difficult to straightforwardly label bloggers as politically left or right, liberal or conservative, as “not every blogger fall into a left or right classification, and many make an effort to be ecumenical and eclectic” (Hyun, Reese, Jeong, & Rutigliano, 2007, p. 258). This difficulty may be particularly pertinent for the New Zealand blogs as the mixed-member proportional voting system has resulted in parties such as ACT who are politically right wing but morally liberal, so blogs that support ACT may be more difficult to label. An observational study will reveal whether such categories may be problematic and perhaps more valid and contextually sensitive strategies for alleviating problems. Thirdly, this research chose to study the political blogosphere based on its potential difference to mainstream media discussions of sustainability. An observational study of the blog sample’s structure and conventions will look at how political blogging may (or may not) differ, and if so, in what ways.

It is also important to state what the observational study here does *not* intend to do - there is no intention to comment on blog posts and record conversations without notifying commenters of the fact they are being “studied.” All the blogs being followed are open to the public, as are the comments, so anyone commenting should be aware that their words are visible to anyone with Internet access. Thus, the observational part of this thesis should be considered not as an audience study, but merely an exercise for the researcher that will help to refine and devise well-rounded research questions, coding categories, and relevant, contextualised avenues of enquiry for the discourse and content analysis. The observational study of the political blog sample comes with an important disclaimer. Some past studies of blogs have attempted to define categories and tendencies of “blogs” in general (see, for example Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005, p. 195). While these studies certainly provoke thought on what exactly constitutes a “blog,” this analysis does not seek to generalise its findings to all political blogs (especially given the small sample size), let alone the entire blogosphere itself. Being an avid follower of political blogs, food blogs, style blogs and design blogs, it is clear that different types of blogs have vastly different audiences, etiquette, purposes and formats. Even within a type there are difficulties with categorisation, given the added complication of different blogging platforms/software (eg. Blogger vs Wordpress vs Tumblr) designed with different communities and purposes in mind. Thus this study does not generalise the following observations to other political blogs.

4.4 Qualitative discourse analysis

The blog post sample will be analysed through an analysis of discourse in a Foucauldian sense, whereby discourse is considered as the common-sense knowledge and beliefs produced by, and reinforcing of, a certain “regime of truth” through which power operates (Brown, 2006, pp. 70-71). This “regime of truth” consists:

As an ensemble of speech practices that carry values, classifications, and meanings...discourse never merely describes but rather, creates relationships and channels of authority through the articulation of norms...representation ceases to be merely representation...but is rather, a crucial field of power (Brown, 2006, pp. 70-71).

In adopting this conceptualisation of discourse, this thesis acknowledges that conflicts about environmental problems do not simply have “actors pro and con”; rather, such conflicts are a manifestation over the “continuous struggle over the definition and the meaning of the

environmental problem itself" (Hajer, 1997, pp. 14-15). This sense of struggle is reflected in the Foucauldian sense of discourse whereby:

Truth is not underneath or outside representation; power is never fully tangible but, rather, is an effect of the norms issuing from particular orders of words and images...that are constructed as much by silences, blank spaces, and framing as by the words and images themselves (Brown, 2006, p. 72).

As others note, "no one text can define a discursive subject," but widely disseminated meanings help shape public understanding of certain concepts (J. Anderson, 2012, p. 345), such as sustainability. These struggle for salience can also be more holistically understood by keeping in mind the currently dominant neoliberal political economic context, a context in which "media texts are rarely produced or distributed that do not, in some way, advance the interests of the corporate masters" (J. Anderson, 2012, p. 344). Thus, as some others have also done, the qualitative discourse analysis seeks to unravel the "discourse that helps to reach decisions and sustain support for those decisions" (Koop & Jansen, 2009, p. 156).

Despite this study's focus on the text, it is necessary to note that meaning making is a process where other cultural and personal factors also play an important role in creating meaning *in addition to* the media (Hansen, 1991, p. 454; Polonsky & Kilbourne, 2005; Whiteman, 1999). For example, Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) study of nuclear power media discourse and public opinion found that, in addition to the media, individuals' life histories, social interactions and personal dispositions had a huge influence on people's perceptions of the environment. Thorough audience studies in future research would provide a far more complete picture of the influence blogs and specific posts, as well as other factors, have on individuals. However, there are several important reasons for analysing these blogs through a qualitative discourse analysis. As blogs are complementary form of political participation (McKenna, 2007, p. 210), they are an emerging media that blur the line between a mere media source and a place for conversation and debate that helps shape people's worldview, thanks to the ability for readers to leave comments. These differences are often difficult (and, for the purposes of this study, unproductive) to quantify and categorise empirically. For example, comment counts in themselves do not reveal much about the *kind* of interaction blogs facilitate (or do not facilitate) (Herring, et al., 2005, p. 164). Whatever "interaction" may actually entail, and the potential relevance this may have on how people comment, in addition to contradicting statements (Corner & Richardson, 1993, p. 231), and more manifest content (eg. sarcasm) would be difficult to capture quantitatively (J. Anderson, 2012, p. 327). The multitude of

ideologies that shape bloggers' or readers' worldviews about sustainability are also not necessarily consistently "countable" (Burgess, 1990, p. 148). The process and context of meaning creation need further elaboration beyond numbers, especially to answer the third research question about "how" neoliberalism may be expressed in the blogs. This purpose is quite different to that of a quantitative approach which categorises and counts references to meaning. The sources bloggers link to for example are not always ones that the blogger straightforwardly agrees or supports. The aim of this interpretive analysis is therefore not to create "generalizable proofs, but compelling arguments about media, meaning and sociocultural significance" (J. Anderson, 2012, p. 346) whilst also ensuring a more holistic understanding of what the bloggers may be trying to communicate.

There are inevitable limitations to inferring too much from discourse analyses of blog posts and comments on their own. Much of the online content being analysed in this study, for example, lacks features of face to face interactions between researchers and those they are researching. In contrast, interviews would be able to pick up the nuanced effects of mood, surroundings and personal factors on responses, which the mostly textual content of blog posts and comments cannot so easily express (Stewart & Mann, 2000, p. 87). A discourse analysis cannot infer what audiences will make of the text despite the comments they may leave, nor are the results replicable. While an audience study is beyond the scope of this study, a content analysis will attempt to reliably record those features which can be categorised and help to determine what is pertinent to Research question 1, about how political bloggers discuss sustainability.

The discourse analysis should not be considered as generalizable beyond the blogs selected in this study, nor should the conclusions be generalised to issues other than sustainability and the environment, given the diversity of blogs in their content, purpose and style. Even the blogs within this study belonging to certain political camps differed in important ways when discussing sustainability issues. Barlow's (2007) observation that "it's impossible to encapsulate the blogs, to say they "are" this or "will be" that" (p. 175) is particularly applicable here. Furthermore, due to the constant changes in Internet communication (Leaning, 2011, p. 88), results should be considered as reflective of the sample *at the time this study was conducted*. The conclusions do not seek to state that any political camp is more "correct" about sustainability than any other, instead, they are aimed at examining the potential meanings in existing discourse about environmental sustainability.

4.5 Quantitative content analysis

A content analysis of the blog post content aimed to more objectively support key findings from the qualitative observational and discourse analyses. The unit of analysis for the quantitative analysis was the blog post as a whole. Each post was coded under the following variables (for full coding sheet, see Appendix I Coding sheet, and for additional rules see Appendix II Additional coding rules):⁶

1. **Blog** – Which blog the post is from
2. **Advertising presence on blog** – Whether blog is “advertising-present” or “advertising-free”
3. **Blog’s ideological slant** – Conservative/right wing, or Liberal/left wing, or unclear
4. **Topics** – What aspects of sustainability are discussed (eg. pollution, natural resources, economic costs of sustainability)
5. **How sustainability is/could be enhanced** – strategies advocated for enhancing sustainability
6. **Source types** – Who is quoted, cited or linked to
7. **Who is enhancing sustainability** – Either trying to or successfully
8. **Who is preventing sustainability** – Intentionally or effectively
9. **Motivation to act sustainably** – Whether post advocates for more action or criticises existing actions
10. **Audience empowerment** – What action(s) the post advocates: civil or consumer action, or both

The definitions of each variable and its options were refined during the observational and discourse analyses, so that key findings that answered the research questions had quantifiable evidence where possible, and so that variables measured what they intended to measure. For example, initially the links on each post were to be another unit of analysis coded for presence of advertising, political ideology/affiliation, and site type (ie. blog, static website, other social media), in order to determine what types of sources the bloggers in this sample predominantly used. However, these variables proved more problematic than first perceived. The qualitative analyses revealed that sources were

⁶ From the fourth to the ninth variable, coders could select several options within the variable to allow for a more full capture of what was mentioned in each post. Each option was coded as its own variable, either absent or present. Videos and photos in the posts were not coded due to a lack of time and the different kinds of coding skill this would entail.

not all linked to, and links were not all to sources (eg. links to an author's twitter account). The "sources in post" variable was consequently designed to capture in-text references to sources as well as links that were used to indicate sources used or simply commented on, reducing the unintended conflation of link and source and the missing of in text sources. Furthermore, blogs and static web sites adopted elements of each other so regularly in their development that it became difficult to consistently categorise without frequently altering the coding criteria. The coding sheet in this study conflates blogs and mainstream media under the media variable, and whilst this does not capture as much detail, it allowed for more reliable results.

4.5.1.1 Intercoder reliability

Due to human and resource constraints, only a 25% sample from each blog was intercoded. This was necessary as the original coding variables, definitions and rules were refined several times for greater clarity and understanding between the two coders, as part of training.

Eighty per cent of variables achieved intercoder reliability values above 90% raw percentage agreement or .9 for Scott's Pi, Cohen's Kappa, or Krippendorff's Alpha, with the remaining twenty per cent of variables achieving .65-.8 for the three agreement measurements. However, the variables with lower reliability scores all achieved more than 90% raw percentage agreements. The first three variables were not intercoded as these variables do not require any potential subjective judgments.

4.5.1.2 Limitations and changes

As a form of metric coding, content analyses are meant to be reliable and replicable, and ideally based on objectively categorised sets of media texts to ensure validity is maximised (J. Anderson, 2012, pp. 286-287). Whilst the validity of the content analysis is strengthened by the preceding qualitative analyses, the sample size is relatively small as the content analysis is supplementary to the qualitative analysis. Therefore the results here cannot be generalizable, especially given the huge size and diversity of the blogosphere.

In addition, the variables were also limited in their level of detail. Initially, source types distinguished between different types of blogs (liberal, conservative, advertising-present, advertising-free, mainstream news website, independent news website etc). However, during testing it became apparent that these distinctions were far less concrete than first imagined.

Determining what was “commercial” advertising or not, and what was “mainstream” for example, proved difficult and at times arbitrary. It also became harder to distinguish between news sites and blogs as the two adopted elements of each other and changed regularly (indeed, even *Huffington Post* and *Grist* in this sample would cause definitional quandaries). Thus, the content analysis in this thesis ended up playing a minor supporting role to the qualitative findings, given the limitations of detail and ephemeral nature of the online space.

5 Results

5.1 How political bloggers discuss sustainability

5.1.1 Rarely and superficially

The amount of blog content discussing sustainability was still very low, to the extent where posts from years ago had to be included in the sample of ten posts from each blog. This sample demonstrated a lack of attention to environmental issues more generally, so the rarity of posts is not just attributable to the fact that these bloggers used a different term to talk about the environment. As touched on in the methodology with regards to post sample selection, some blogs discussed the environment so rarely that posts from two years ago had to be included in the post sample.

The rarity of environmental content in itself would not be so concerning if bloggers talked about sustainability in depth or meaningfully. The *Dim-Post* acknowledged the widespread apathy towards “hard” coverage of environmental stories in a satirical aside following discussion of mineral wealthy in New Zealand, stating: “I know, it’s not a trivial smear story against a Labour MP – it’s only about the environment and the economy” (2010b). For these blogs to be considered as spaces for democratic deliberation, discussions and posts should centre on “substantive issues,” instead of focussing on what some scholars dub “superficial” issues such as leadership styles (Koop & Jansen, 2009, p. 157), or “amateur punditry” about party politics (p. 164). However, some of the posts, especially from the New Zealand blogs *Cactus Kate* and *Dim-Post*, did not discuss sustainability in much depth. A substantial portion (for example, Cactus Kate, 2008a, 2008b; Cactus Kate, 2008c, 2009b; Dim Post, 2008, 2010c) mentioned the word “sustainability” only in passing. Other posts simply linked to a video (No Right Turn, 2007b), quoted another source (Dim Post, 2009c; Whale Oil, 2008), or posted to make fun of someone (No Minister, 2008a; Whale Oil, 2011b). The major exception was *Grist*, a blog solely dedicated to discussing issues and stories from an environmental or social justice perspective. However, on the whole, sustainability policies and issues continue to be a fairly minor concern on most of these political blogs. As the next section will demonstrate, the political blogs in this sample mostly did not distinguish themselves from mainstream media through substantive issues, but through oppositional discourse.

5.1.2 Liberals vs Conservatives

As hinted at by Hyun et al. (2007, p. 258), it became difficult to label bloggers as “liberal,” “conservative,” “left-wing” or “right-wing.” This is because blogs with supposedly opposing political ideologies actually occasionally had similar policy recommendations and ideas, as the following sections will detail further. However, they did not ever appear to acknowledge common ground. Political affiliation may therefore be just as dependent on labels as it is policies. Simply for ease of reference however, “conservative” in this analysis refer to blogs which support right-wing or conservative parties in their respective country, or demonstrate a dislike of liberal or left-wing individuals or ideology. These include *Kiwi Blog*, *Whale Oil*, *Home Paddock*, *No Minister*, *NZ Conservative*, and *Cactus Kate*. “Liberal” in this analysis refers to blogs which support left-wing or liberal parties in their respective country, or demonstrate a dislike of conservative or right-wing individuals or ideology. These include the remaining blogs: *The Standard*, *No Right Turn*, *Huffington Post*, *Grist*, and *Think Progress*. The *Dim-Post* is more difficult to classify as a “centre” blog, in that it supports and opposes policy from both left and right leaning parties. It is pertinent to claims about partisan bubbles that only one “centre” blog was in this sample of popular blogs. This minority proportion of centrist or moderate blogs has also been found in US war blogs (Tremayne, Zheng, Lee, & Jeong, 2006, pp. 297-298), supporting other research that finds the wider political blogosphere is highly partisan (Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010, p. 146).

While there were statistically significant⁷ differences between liberal and conservative blogs according to the content analysis, ideologically the differences are somewhat inconsistent with expectations. While liberal blogs made significantly more calls for increased action ($p=.000$), they critiqued existing efforts more as well ($p=.004$). Liberal blogs emphasised the improvement of educational and communicative efforts ($p=.000$), changing style of consumption ($p=.046$), and the need for systemic change ($p=.011$), significantly more than conservative blogs in this study, but not regulation ($p=.161$). This is unexpected given that liberals and the left tend to support regulation to address the inadequacies of a self-regulating market (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p. 98). Furthermore,

⁷ “Significant” differences in this discussion of results refers to statistical significance, where $p < .05$. Percentage values are rounded to the nearest 1%, with p values rounded to 3 decimal places. Percentages reflect the percentage of posts that the variable was “present” in, whereby it was possible to have multiple or no variables present in a single post – hence why each variable adds up to 100%, but not all the variables within the parent variable.

individuals ($p=.003$), industry ($p=.011$), NGOs ($p=.000$), and media ($p=.005$) are mentioned as enhancers in liberal blog posts significantly more than in conservative blogs – surprising since liberals tend to see governments as protectors, and it is conservatives who are expected to champion industry and individuals more given their support for property rights and the free market (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, pp. 98-99). On the other hand, industry is also considered by liberal blogs to be a preventer of sustainability significantly more than conservatives blogs ($p=.007$). Further inconsistencies arise when looking at what individual blogs advocate⁸. For example, *Home Paddock* presented government as an enhancer of sustainability significantly more than the other blogs ($p = .000$), which is slightly surprising given that *Home Paddock* is economically conservative. Conversely, *No Right Turn* as a liberal blog presents government as a preventer of sustainability significantly more than other blogs ($p = .005$), despite being liberal. Therefore there were few results that show liberals or conservatives consistently adhering to the sort of attributions traditionally expected, with several individual blog deviations that suggest political ideology does not necessarily produce uniform and consistent attributions.

5.1.2.1 *Conservative about conservation*

All of the conservative blogs at some point (if fleetingly) acknowledge that ensuring human survival on a finite planet and addressing environmental problems are important issues, however they simply differ with liberals on how to resolve these issues (or the extent to which solving these problems need “interference”). For example, *Whale Oil* agrees with reducing agriculture emissions, even though in the post the writer implies he does not believe in global warming or the efficacy of the Emissions Trading Scheme:

“Despite the rhetoric of Obama and other lying Pinkos Carbonhagen is nothing but a failure...The fact that temperatures aren’t rising has escaped them all...

About the only good thing to come out of Carbonhagen was the superb negotiating skills of Tim Groser... with a proposal that will actually put some cash in our pockets rather than Nick Smith’s daft ETS which will wreck the economy...

⁸ It should be noted that due to the small number of posts, many of the expected counts for individual blogs were less than five, so some significance scores are likely to be highly affected by one post. These findings are therefore considered to be suggestive only, at best.

Groser has succeeded in doing something – agriculture emissions account for 14% of the global total, so if the alliance can halve them, that would be a 7% cut in global emissions – the biggest single practical thing ever to come out of climate change talks (and of benefit to NZ even when climate change is found to be a hoax, because it will have wider environmental benefits such as reducing pollution in rivers) (2009a).

Only *Cactus Kate* openly derides “parents actually teaching their children about the environment... and all the fluffy green rubbish that is making children these days SOFT” (2009b). Despite the majority of conservative bloggers in this sample being willing to change their behaviour effectively for the sake of sustainability, there is little consensus with liberals in this sample.

Conservative bloggers appear suspicious of the use of “sustainability” as they frame it as a greenwashing term used to disguise initiatives that do not actually help the environment in a significant way. *NZ Conservative’s* criticism of Earth Hour for example states that:

We don’t need the AGW scare mongering to understand that reducing energy consumptions is a good thing, and part of sensible and sustainable living. I get annoyed with the one off yearly feel good “raise awareness” activities like switching lights off for an hour...(2010b)

Further disdain for “sustainability” as a politically-left term is expressed in *No Minister’s* post about the “hypocrisy” of the Warehouse’s sustainability claims, after it was fined for “various dodgy practices”:

So much for Stephen Tindall and his ethics, and pro-Liarbour (sic) talk of Sustainability, when his company has been shown to be the most rapacious, greedy capitalists around, misleading his customers like this. But that’s the thing about the left, they are the most guilty of hypocrites! (2009)

Whale Oil reiterates the view that “sustainability” as a term has been hijacked by the centre-left Labour Party in New Zealand, used to disguise lack of actual progress:

Labour’s stupid “green” initiatives that were going to cost \$13 million over two years to achieve very little...Yes, Labour was full of cheap, or inthis (sic) case expensive, slogans. Remember “Closing the gaps”, “Top half of the OECD”, “Sustainability” (2009b)

Despite conservative bloggers’ dislike of the term “sustainability” and those who use the term seriously, it appears as though these bloggers have no actual problem with individuals taking steps to act in an environmentally responsible way. *NZ Conservative* (2010b) suggests painting one’s roof white to conserve energy instead of participating in Earth Hour. However, in large part the term

“sustainability” has come to be associated with ineffective left-wing policy and rhetoric. *Whale Oil* also criticises the “failure of Al Gore,” noting “the climate change religion will collapse under the weight of its leaders own inability to practice what he preaches” (2009a). Conservative discussion of sustainability was therefore preoccupied with labels and political stereotypes.

The main policy distinction conservative bloggers had was that they tended to prefer the government to have a stimulating role in the economy, not what they saw as a restrictive or preventative one. *Kiwi Blog* cited an article noting the new National government’s sustainability strategy: “Now it is much more about encouraging manufacturers to use more energy-efficient light bulbs, not compelling them to” (2009b). The blogger then states “that is a good thing...I say that as someone who has been using those lightbulbs before Labour trie (sic) to force us to” (Kiwi Blog, 2009b). The latter part of this statement is significant, as it reinforces that the “natural” everyday working of the market, where individuals have freedom to choose, will bring about the best outcomes without the need for governmental intervention. Under these assumptions, government regulation is unnecessary, even excessive and damaging. *NZ Conservative* stated the potential danger of excessive government regulation: “Leave governments alone and unrestrained they will expand” (2009c). Conservative bloggers were therefore more likely to espouse neoliberal attitudes towards solving environmental problems that minimise governmental interference in the market.

Instead of government regulation, conservative blogs tended to echo neoliberal faith in markets, consumers, technology, and efficiency improvements in attempts to enhance environmental sustainability. An emphasis on individual choice was reiterated in another post about power company Powershop, where the blogger wrote: “those who are into sustainability over price...can choose to spend a little bit more to have power from renewable sources etc, or have trees planted to offset your usage” (Kiwi Blog, 2009a). *NZ Conservative* goes further, by framing environmentalists as backward:

They see doom for the planet and their implied solution is to abandon science and revert to some kind of dark age. No oil, limited population, reduced standards of living, and abandoning an economic system that thrives on innovation, trade, and individual rewards. (2009c)

The blogger instead believed in “increasing investment in clean technology, and encouraging innovation and personal responsibility” (NZ Conservative, 2009c). This was because they believed that “science moves onwards towards sustainability and reducing pollution automatically, and we don’t need to legislate to force that inevitable progress - it is happening anyway” (NZ Conservative,

2010b). Conservative blogs were therefore far more likely to encourage a sense of complacency about sustainability.

Conservative blogs also tended to frame sustainability problems as a zero-sum game, where they could label liberals in general as hypocrites, because they were not seen to live totally sustainably. *Cactus Kate*, for example, derided “Seeby” (a wealthy entrepreneur) for owning a Ferrari, an act which in isolation seemed to cancel out any other “green” aspects of his life:

...he has raised more hypocrisy in the green movement to be profiting from carbon credit "trading" while at the same time happily ruining the environment with a gas guzzler. I have no issue with the gas guzzler, just don't pretend you care about the environment. (2008b)

Despite the importance of individuals practising what they preach, those that do attempt to live genuinely sustainably are still derided, as is evidenced by a *No Minister* (2008a) post about the Green Party as cave-dwellers. Thus, living sustainably, even taken to its most genuine extent, was not considered as a desirable goal. However, when profitable or practical, conservatives did actually advocate sustainable behaviour change at the individual level.

5.1.2.2 *Liberal blogs call for more urgent action on sustainability issues*

Two liberal blogs in New Zealand were especially urgent in their calls for change, as they considered the unregulated market to be flawed, and the cause of many social and environmental problems in the first place. *No Right Turn*, in a post discussing New Zealand’s fisheries Quota Management System, wrote: “The fishing industry regard a fishery as “sustainable” until the last fish is gone, and their job as a race to get that fish” (2007a). Unregulated industry was therefore seen not as a source of boundless innovation, but an actor forced or swayed to prioritise short-term profit even above their livelihood. The market *system* focussed on growth was also framed as a problem in addition to the individuals within the system. A writer at *The Standard* pointed out that “Continual growth in the use of resources is not possible... [yet] Our present monetary and economic system relies on growth to work” (2011). Another post states:

The first and most prominent question for growth now has to be: is it sustainable? ...even if we do suddenly take to electric cars, powered from a national grid of nuclear fusion, wave power and desert solar, our cars and phones will be using too many rare metals and there may not be enough water for 9+ billion people to all eat as much meat as they’d like. (The Standard, 2010c)

Given that the root causes of unsustainability were seen as systemic, *No Right Turn* and *The Standard* tended to go beyond recommending changes within the current model of economic thinking. *The Standard* for example advocated “equality” and “increasing equality” among a vast list of drastic changes to the monetary system to achieve this overarching goal (The Standard, 2010c, 2011). These findings were somewhat in line with other studies showing liberal blogs to focus more on “building a progressive movement” and “political mobilization,” whereas conservative blogs tended to be sites of commentary (Lawrence, et al., 2010, p. 150).

The US liberal blogs tended to criticise the way *individual* businesses operate, in more isolation from the market system. Businesses were framed as capable of being environmentally positive, but they just needed to modernise the way they work to be more sustainable, like the other businesses that had already done so. For example, *Grist* shared a video of a talk given by Ray Anderson, a businessman who “increased sales and doubled profits while turning the traditional “take/make/waste” industrial system on its head” (2009c). Given that it was possible for Ray Anderson to turn an unsustainable system around, the post implied that it was within the power of other businesses to do the same, if only they would bother to do so. The *Huffington Post* (2011c) also recognised Ray Anderson as a “Giant of Sustainability,” perpetuating the idea that individuals can pioneer the move towards sustainability in isolation. More subtly, another *Huffington Post* writer stated that:

...there is the potential to influence such large blocks of people toward more sustainable practices in the course of simply doing business more *wisely*...Institutions will save money on energy, have better designed buildings and grounds, and develop more engaged employees... (emphasis added) (2011g)

Achieving sustainability did not therefore require regulation of industries or a change of the economic system, but simply a willingness to change entrenched, and “unwise” ways of doing business. Unsustainable businesses or individuals were therefore cast as ignorant, and simply in need of education. Effectively, the current economic system and culture of competition was actually seen as commensurable with, even desirable for, achieving sustainability. The following post described the way in which competition through the market would achieve sustainability:

Once it's shown to be possible to adopt more sustainable practices at a leading company without going broke, competitors have little defense when NGOs demand that they adopt similar practices. When they do, the differentiated becomes generic, and the responsibility frontier irreversibly expands... (Huffington Post, 2011h)

Yet, there was no mention that “demands from NGOs” required coordinated funding and collective action, both of which are clearly lacking given the current state of the environment covered in the literature review. Another post in *Think Progress* stressed the importance of investment in sustainable development due to “its immense opportunity and profitability” (2011f). Consequently, the need for governmental regulation is vastly diminished. However if sustainability was as straightforwardly profitable as these posts suggests, the market would have solved most environmental problems by now.

5.1.2.3 *Explicitly partisan blogs divisive*

Explicitly partisan blogs were particularly divisive on environmental issues, even when both liberals and conservative bloggers in this sample expressed that they cared about sustainability. This was true of both left and right wing blogs. *NZ Conservative* for example stated that “I absolutely believe in the importance of human kind living in a sustainable way. I buy into the concept that we are God's people on this Earth, to be stewards and custodians of the planet” (2009c). Yet liberal blog content in this sample was devoid of any acknowledgement of the potential routes to working together to alleviate environmental problems. Instead, explicitly liberal blogs framed conservatives as utterly uncaring of the environment and in some cases wilfully unsustainable, as will be discussed in the next paragraph. On the other hand, conservatives simply critiqued liberals as hypocrites or dismissed them as being too radical, potentially missing possibilities of working together too. These potential lost opportunities were mentioned by the *Dim-Post*, who stated that it is:

a quirk of history that environmentalism has come to be associated with progressive radicalism when it is actually a very conservative philosophy...Conservatism means – literally – to save and preserve and it opposes change for the sake of change (Dim Post, 2009a)

However, none of the partisan blogs in this sample indicated any possibility of opposing political ideologies working together on a common interest issue in an agreeable way.

For the more “extreme” partisan blogs, the purpose of some environmental content was, presumably, to *demonise* the “other” side, by assuming the worst of intentions, and by putting words in the opposition’s mouths so as to frame them as totally unreasonable. In a post about privatising roads, *No Right Turn* sarcastically wrote:

National is proposing to reduce the frequency of consultation, and restrict it by e.g. making use of the Special Consultative Process (which requires a

formal proposal and hearing of public submissions) "optional"... So, the usual undemocratic authoritarianism from national then...they'll also...remove "affordability" and "sustainability" as criteria for transport planning. So, we'll have unaffordable, environmentally unsustainable roads. Nice. (2011)

Liberals were often framed as being against innovation and progress. *NZ Conservative* for example wrote that:

Maybe we can save the planet! The Greenies argue that we need to save it from ourselves, by attacking ourselves... there are a select bunch of scientists who say they believe in science, but they don't believe in people. They believe people are the problem... the debate is framed even narrower - we need to curb our output by abandoning science, abandoning free trade (which underpins our ability to innovate and improve) and about abandoning an underlying faith in human kind... (2009c)

NZ Conservative made their conceptualisation of "Greenies" even clearer, framing them not only as anti-science but also anti-common sense: "I'm happy to work towards sustainability and minimizing pollution just for (sic) because it makes good sense; but I suspect pragmatism may not be radical enough for AGW believers" (2009b). Thus, for conservatives, when liberals take small actions, the actions are equated to hypocritical tokenism, and more wholly sustainable approaches are considered excessive. *Cactus Kate*, in her post opposing Nick Smith's proposal to charge 5c for plastic bags, pointed out how "Green propagandists" over-exaggerated humans' impact on the earth:

This stupid piece of legislation will not be the last in this ridiculous assumption put out by Green propagandists that every time a human being or animal uses the earth's resources that they are somehow polluting the planet. Nonsense. (2009c)

Another example that cast the opposite side as unreasonable and engaging in pointless activity was *Whale Oil's* post about the "failure of Carbonhagen (sic)":

Despite the rhetoric of Obama and other lying Pinkos Carbonhagen is nothing but a failure. Like modern day King Canutes they think they are going to halt the rise in temperatures just by saying it will be so... Ultimately though, Carbonhagen has proven to be a massive disappointment to the most hardened Green apostles and for that we should be grateful. (2009a)

The last sentence is particularly revealing of the "war of words" that explicitly partisan blogs engage in, where disagreement goes beyond reason and strikes a personal, emotional chord.

The blogs with self-declared biases (*No Right Turn* and *NZ Conservative*) also tended to discourage dissenting dialogue in various ways, whether explicitly or implicitly. *No Right Turn* no longer allows comments, while *NZ Conservative*, *Whale Oil* and *No Minister* commenters tended to be largely supportive. The tendency for comments to be largely supportive partly echoes trends from another study, which found the comments sections of political blogs largely as a space for ideologically homogenous conversation, stereotyping opponents and rarely considering different viewpoints (Walker, 2006, p. 6). In contrast, blogs which espoused both liberal and conservative views (eg. *Dim-Post*) had both *more* comments and more *variety* of thoughts and debate, some on fairly serious issues despite the blog being dedicated to satire. This may have been because readers perceived the blogger (and perhaps also other readers of that blog) to be more open minded. Therefore it could be worth posting a disagreeing comment because it stood a chance of having some impact in terms of changing readers' minds.

What is of most concern for the sustainability narrative in the political blogs studied here is that the divisiveness not only reduces the likelihood of rational debate, it also reduces the chances of working together to create outcomes based on consensus when the opportunities arise. There were examples of inclusiveness and openness in this blog sample which should not be ignored. However, the personalised, uncensored nature of blogs also opened up forums for far more divisive discussions about sustainability and the environment. As has been found in past studies of online communications, the blogs in this sample tended to perpetuate fragmented and partisan communication (Leaning, 2011, p. 97). Despite ideals of the "blogosphere" as a potential public sphere, the personalised partisanship on these blogs echo the concern that blogs are actually a "far cry from the development of citizenship and rational discourse that Habermas identified as the goal of deliberative action" (p. 97). As noted, these divisive discussions, "at worst...may protect the very status quo authors purport to attack by heightening political divisions...[m]erely mimicking the politics already at play almost renders the whole exercise pointless" (Audette-Longo, 2009, p. n.p.).

5.1.2.4 "Green", not mainstream

From posts across the political spectrum, those who were seen to practise sustainable living or propose "environmentally-friendly" policy were still seen as outside the norm. Conservative blogs tended to either deride these people and their practices by labelling them as "pinkos" (Whale Oil, 2009a), or "Greenies," which had a desire to be backward (NZ Conservative, 2009c). *No Minister* for

example mentioned a speech given by co-leader of the Green party in New Zealand, accompanied with the image below:



Our first goal is to lead a coalition government dedicated to sustainability, peace, justice and democracy. This country needs a Green Prime Minister like Jeanette Fitzsimons and it needs one fast...

The above, taken from a speech by Russell Norman (sic), will happen at about the same time our nation's capital is moved from Wellington to Waitomo. The photo above shows how Green Party caucus meetings will look if the Greens ever get their way. The caves the rest of us will live in will not be as flash. (2008a)

The absence of capital letters in Russell Norman and the party's name indicated personal disrespect for the party. The fourth sentence also alluded to the fact that the Green Party represented a minority in parliament, further contributing to the notion that those dedicated to a "green" lifestyle are part of a radical minority. Alternatively those who are less extreme in their advocacy for living more sustainably (such as Al Gore) may be labelled as hypocrites because they are not doing enough in comparison to what they "preach" (Whale Oil, 2011a). In more extreme cases, anyone who professed an idea to alleviate environmental problems was teased: *Cactus Kate* referred to Nick Smith, who proposed a 5c charge on plastic bags, as a "namby pamby" who can "go and hug a tree with women sporting houstaches (sic?)" (2009a). Conservatives in this sample therefore conceptualised open caring for the environment as a sort of social stigma.

Liberal blogs may have celebrated those who did practise sustainable living, but subtly still framed such individuals as outside of mainstream culture (partly because this is the case). Part of the very allure of buying green for example is that it is alternative, radical and therefore "cool" (Banaji & Buckingham, 2009). The juxtaposition of "green" with mainstream consumerism was actively promoted in supposedly counter-cultural discourses. *Grist* (2009d) expressed surprise at a

mainstream media outlet (*Time* magazine) covering a story entitled “The Real Cost of Cheap Food.” The title of the blog post was “Sustainable ag meets the MSM – and wins!” The exclamation mark denoted feigned surprise, emphasised by the rhetorical questions: “TIME Magazine talking about exhausted soil? Whooda thunkit?” If those from within green media perpetuate discourses that continue to frame “greenies” as a minority, more centre-oriented media are also more likely to feel comfortable reinforcing this framing. The *Dim-Post* for example stated that “environmentalism has come to be associated with progressive radicalism,” (2009a) effectively hinting that environmentalism is still a fringe movement. Another example was the *Huffington Post* (2011i) story about a girl with autism who chose to live on an organic farm rather than in an apartment. Though the story was a feel-good one, the desire to live on a farm was still framed as “different” and unexpected:

When Wendy Kaplan gathered her 26-year-old daughter Rachel's circle of support to discuss options for living independently, she thought they would talk about moving to an apartment. But Rachel... had a different idea. She wanted to live on a farm. Thus began SustainAbility, a one-acre farm... "This wasn't our first choice, as you can imagine," Wendy said. (*Huffington Post*, 2011i)

The reluctance Wendy displayed in the last sentence, in combination with the reference to wider social norms (“as you can imagine”), inferred that sustainable living is still considered strange and unfamiliar.

5.1.3 Distanced from the environment

Many of the blog posts in this study were fairly disengaged from the natural environment in their discussions about sustainability. This disconnect was reflected in the abstract way in which sustainability issues were discussed, in part due to the economic and political focus of many of the posts. An exception was *Home Paddock*'s post about cow inductions, where the blogger wrote:

In town life is clean. Food comes from supermarkets in hygienic packages.
On farms life is a bit messier. Food comes from living, breathing animals.
Life here is dirty and dusty, muddy and bloody...(2010b)

Cow inductions are described as “a process to get late calving cows to calve up to ten weeks earlier than they naturally would [which] results in the birth of premature dead or dying calves” but is undertaken to suit farmer’s milking schedules (SAFE, 2010). *Home Paddock*, which is written by a farmer, is one of the few blogs written by someone who has regular contact with the natural

environment. The blogger writes about their experiences explicitly and specifically (the subtitle of the blog is “A rural perspective with a blue tint”). The post above alluded to the distance between urban people and where food comes from. On a more general level however, it also hinted at an urban distance from *nature*, a distance which was perceived to cause alarm for certain practices out of context – in this case, according to the writer, inductions happen to a minority of cows, and when it does happen farmers are not complacent about it. The other possible exception to the pattern of distanced discussions of nature was a post about water contamination, where the writer was in the country (Haiti) where the pollution was a problem. The post acknowledges long-time readers who “know of the daily challenges I have outlined...clean water -- needed for daily essentials... -- remains one of the core hurdles we have faced” (Huffington Post, 2011b). On the whole however, most of the blog posts in this sample talked about “environmental issues” or “sustainability” without presenting any cues that they had experienced the *consequences* of unsustainable practices first hand. This is particularly concerning since the mainstream media have also perpetuated these distanced narratives.

The fact that blogs in this study rarely discussed direct experiences with nature makes them even less engaging than television portrayals of environmental issues. This is because television presents imagery of nature (Howard-Williams, 2009, pp. 91-92), or people who have experienced environmental problems. The study by Howard-Williams (2009, p. 84) did however find a similar tendency for television programmes to frame the environment as “separate from everyday life,” not deeply enmeshed within it. Fundamentally, “the environment is...talked about rather than experienced” (2009, p. 84). Perhaps this also helps explain why, despite widespread acknowledgement (in both this study and the above mentioned study) that the environment is important, very few bloggers provided experiential evidence (p. 95). From a technologically determinist view, television “drowned out” the contact people used to have with their physical world, which formed a crucial consciousness well-informed about the limits of nature and of certain places (McKibben, 1992, pp. 22, 28). Most of the blog content studied here was quite similar to disconnected mainstream portrayals of the environment discussed in the literature review, and first-hand experiential posts were rare due to the political emphasis of these blogs. Even *Grist*, which is environment-focussed, perpetuated this tendency. There may be smaller green lifestyle magazines or blogs that cover the environment in a more experiential way. However, the paucity of experiential environmental discussion in both these popular blogs’ sustainability posts and mainstream media coverage is concerning, since the media are a major resource people use to inform themselves about the environment given the aforementioned lack of contact with it (Ader, 1995, p. 300).

5.1.4 Demotivating and disempowering audiences

The political blogs in this sample also critiqued existing efforts to enhance sustainability (in 55% of all posts), almost twice as much as they supported existing efforts (29%) – see Figure 5.1. This perhaps reflects the wider disagreements about what sustainability might entail and how it is achieved, as mentioned in the literature review. Such disagreements are not particularly motivating in terms of encouraging behaviour change towards more sustainable living, either on a micro or macro scale. This finding in isolation may not be so concerning, but within the current context, the conflict-ridden coverage in political blogs may exacerbate existing barriers for readers to behave more sustainably, either as consumers or citizens or both. Consumers for example are already overwhelmed with the sheer complexity and number of actions one can take to save the environment (Brower & Leon, 1999), the proliferation of opposing viewpoints contradicting each other (Corner & Richardson, 1993, p. 225), and the increasing politicisation of science leading to distrust of environmental scientists (Hajer, 1997, p. 11). With the majority of the posts in this sample not encouraging involvement in an existing initiative that they support, it is questionable as to how empowering such blog posts are. This is even more concerning given the findings for audience empowerment.

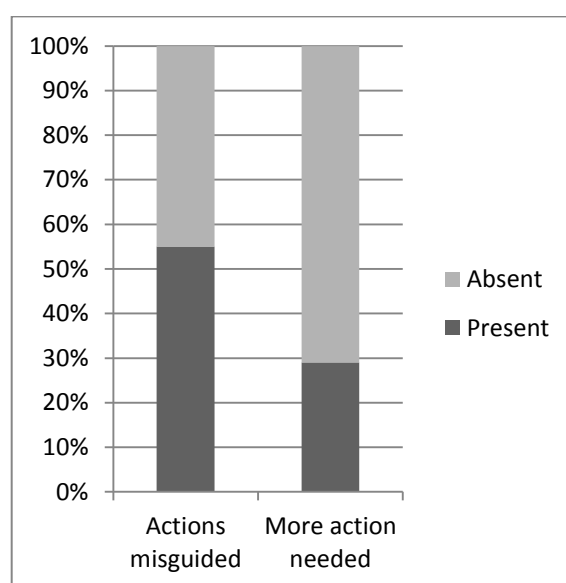


Figure 5.1 Motivation to act sustainably

Most posts in this sample were cynical rather than proactive, and the disempowerment they may spread was further reinforced by the low frequency of calls to action. There was a major lack of

explicit calls for action in this sample: a purchase or civic action was only present in 11% of posts – see Figure 5.2.

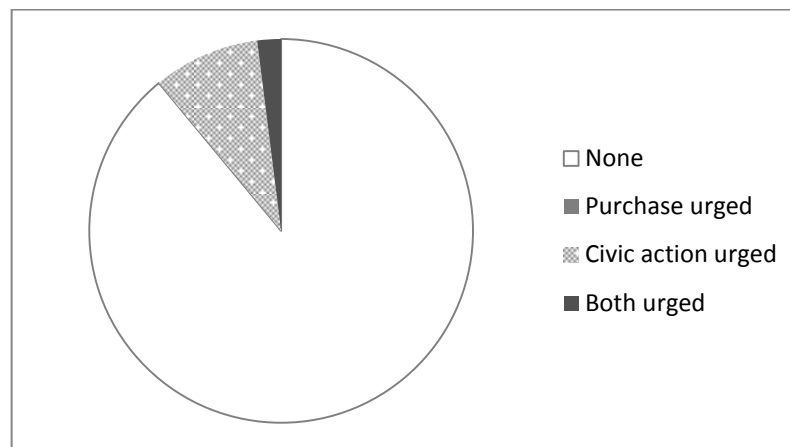


Figure 5.2 Audience empowerment

Out of the few actions advocated, very few purchases were urged, and only ever in conjunction with a civic action (2%, but always in conjunction with a civic action). The observational study for example also came across very few direct urges to purchase products. This may be partially attributable to the fact that these political blogs do not, by convention, urge readers to buy, acting in large part as reviewers or critics. The lack of explicit calls to act (either as citizen or consumer, or both) is interesting given that political bloggers have been found to be highly motivated to blog because they wish to inform and influence public opinion by providing an alternative perspective to mainstream media (Ekdale, et al., 2010, p. 224).

The rarity of civic action advocacy on these blogs is somewhat worrisome as it may end up placing the onus on NGOs and non-profits, who are rarely mentioned in the mainstream media. Furthermore, some studies show that non-profits have little regard for the Internet’s democratising power (Kenix, 2008) and that they often under-utilise social media such as Facebook (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009, p. 105) despite social media’s beneficial communicative potential (Curtis et al., 2010, p. 92). Instead, NGOs and non-profits are increasingly adopting commercial, consumerist discourse to raise funds (Kenix, 2011, pp. 150-151), or promoting “ethical consumerism” to youth as a form of campaigning (Banaji & Buckingham, 2009). One has to wonder where, if not in the mainstream media, political blogs, or NGO and non-profit campaigns, citizens go to become part of the solutions for sustainability, without having to buy something first.

5.2 Neoliberalism in bloggers' sustainability discourse

5.2.1 The price of sustainability

Protecting the environment was discussed by the bloggers here with an assumption that nature is enclosed, and has an objective monetary value that is the single most important variable in policymaking or attempts to convince the public about the environment's significance. The *Dim-Post* (2010b) quoted *No Right Turn's* post about "the numbers around mineral wealth" and natural resources, encapsulating their value in purely monetary terms. The economic cost of environmental policy was the main cost discussed by the blogs in this sample, as opposed to costs to health or psychological wellbeing for example. The economy and environment were mostly also rendered somewhat independent of each other. Reducing environmental harm was considered preferable but optional, an add-on that businesses or people should be able to *choose*, but only because it would otherwise be detrimental to economic performance. For example, prior to the Green Party campaign mentioned above, the *Dim-Post* stated that "I'd vote for the Greens – because I care about environmental issues – but...I suspect they'd fund their terribly worthy social justice policies by taxing me into oblivion" (2008). It could be argued that one of the factors leading to the Green Party's surge in popularity in the 2011 elections was their awareness of the public's desire to account for sustainability. This may be because caring about environmental issues is often perceived to come at a cost that is too large to bear. The prioritisation of calculating economic cost over environmental cost is further demonstrated in a post that evaluated the purportedly profitable but environmentally damaging practice of mining: *Kiwi Blog*, for example, asked for more economic figures to justify mining: "more information is needed and the Government needs to make a more convincing case than merely relying on an estimate of potential mineral wealth in each area" (2010). However, there was no call for more information about the environmental impact of the policy path in question, effectively perpetuating a discourse where environmental sustainability is a secondary concern after economic costs have been calculated.

Grist was the only blog in the sample which did not consistently prioritise economic costs over environmental ones, but assigned them equal value or questioned the prioritisation of economic growth over environmental prudence. While one *Grist* post shared a video of Ray Anderson, a businessman who "increased sales and doubled profits while turning the traditional "take / make / waste" industrial system on its head" (2009c), the site was largely dedicated to articles critiquing businesses and the industrial system. For example, another article in the post sample quoted a

report stating “[T]here is no getting over the fact that the majority of product designers earn their living supplying growth-dependent economies with novelties for our ever-more-insatiable appetites” (Grist, 2011d). The more challenging discourse in *Grist* and the importance of the environment may be due to the fact that it was the only blog with an environmental focus. However, whilst *Grist* gave the environment a higher than or equal importance compared to economic concerns, along with the other blogs, it still did not completely escape neoliberal discourse, as will be discussed in section 5.3.3.

Given past claims that blogs still produce content within dominant political economic narratives (Hands, 2011, p. 39), it is perhaps unsurprising that discussions about sustainability or environmental issues are predominantly analysed within an economic-centric discourse in this blog sample. The content analysis found that the top three aspects of sustainability mentioned were economic, pollution, and energy, present in 58%, 50% and 28% of all posts respectively (see Figure 5.3):

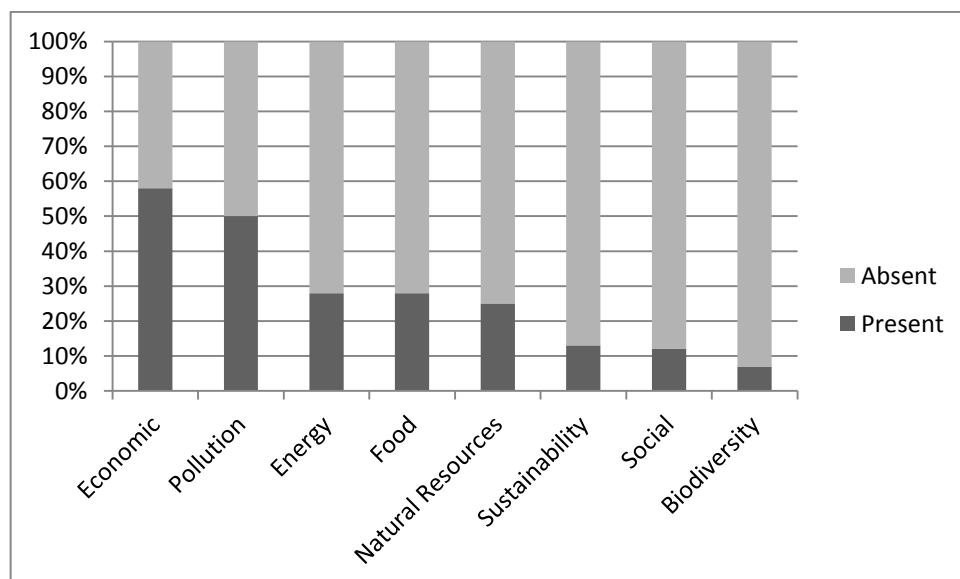


Figure 5.3 Aspects of sustainability discussed

Economic factors were not just discussed in the *majority* of posts – the qualitative discourse analysis found that economic concerns often took precedence or priority over environmental concerns. There was acknowledgement that certain sustainability policies and practices could save money, but in many cases sustainability objectives were seen as detrimental to economic growth. *Kiwi Blog* for example cites a *New Zealand Herald* article that states the “new Government...is none too keen on the word “sustainability” and there is a recession, so money is tight,” however the writer then states “It is unfortunate that some businesses do see sustainability as costing more, because in many

circumstances it doesn't" (2009b). Some bloggers were explicit that economic concerns *should* be prioritised by both consumers and government when implementing environmental policies, or at least be of equal importance. *Home Paddock* mentioned that "when people say sustainable it often just means environmental and forgets the economic and social legs of the sustainability," however the only "social legs" of sustainability the writer referred to were "private property rights [which] are one of the foundation stones of democracy. If the greater good impinges on those rights then compensation must be paid" (2008). However, *No Right Turn* recognised the importance of the environment in relation to the economy: "You can't shit in your own nest forever. If we poison our rivers and drain our aquifers, there will be no economy" (2010). Yet overall, the political blogs in this study echoed the sort of economic prioritisation that one would expect from a commercial mainstream media outlet, whether or not the blogs contained advertising. As previous political blog researchers have warned, "simply because content is produced by an individual citizen, does not mean it does not rely upon corporate models of communication, mainstream ideologies and corporate content" (Kenix, 2009, p. 815).

The political blogs in this study perpetuate a far more widespread focus on economic aspects of sustainability. The above findings are in line with a study of environmental discourse in New Zealand television, which found that political leaders on television framed environmental issues mostly in terms of both their economic cost and benefit (Howard-Williams, 2009, pp. 90-91). Economic prioritisation is also reflected in the discourse used by the New Zealand government and many businesses. The motto for the Ministry for the Environment is "environmental stewardship for a prosperous New Zealand" (Ministry for the Environment, 2011). While sustainability (environmental and social) is gaining credence in business circles, "company reporting tends to indicate a strong weighting toward economic imperatives at the expense of social and environmental indicators" (Roper, 2004, p. 23). This reflects the fact that the "public interest" is often tied to the health of the market in a market-driven political economy such as New Zealand's (Weaver & Motion, 2002, p. 329). It appears that blogs cannot escape the fact that "media systems are interwoven into the ideological framework of society" (Kenix, 2011, p. 139). The consistent prioritisation of economic concerns over environmental concerns in this sample may therefore be considered a *part* of the widespread promulgation of neoliberalisation. Neoliberal values were directly reflected in the political economic changes that took place since the mid-1980s (Weaver & Motion, 2002, pp. 329-330), including deregulation of the finance sector and the privatisation of public assets in "telecommunications, lands and survey, forestry and mining" (Hope, 2012, p. 36). More mainstream media discourse from both politicians and journalists emphasised the superiority of market culture

(Hope, 2012, p. 39). Going back to Foucault, these mediated and repeated prioritisations within and beyond political blogs establish and perpetuate norms that entrench market dominance in environmental discourse.

Some posts also considered sustainability as a variant of economic growth. One writer on *Think Progress* conceptualised sustainable development as “global environmentally-intelligent economic growth,” and “a framework for thinking about how to empower individuals and communities to help them realize their economic potential” (2011e). Nature and the environment are predominantly seen as resources used to achieve increasing material gain, and this conceptualisation is framed as global in orientation. *Think Progress* mentions “Kenyans are dependent on the environment for economic success,” and “InterAction, the largest alliance of U.S. based international NGOs” who support sustainable development, suggesting that it is universally desirable, even if it must “take place on the local level” (2011e). Economic sustainability is therefore the overarching goal, and success and empowerment are defined in predominantly economic terms.

5.2.2 The changing face of governance

As mentioned in the literature review, neoliberalisation does not necessarily render government defunct. In this sample, the “ideological shape” of the government was such that government acted as another important investor in the global competitive marketplace. Bloggers in this sample thus viewed government positively when playing a stimulating role in the market. As a blogger at *The Standard* pointed out in a rare post explicitly critiquing neoliberalism’s conceptualisation of government:

Neoliberalism believes that government, to the extent that it should exist at all, should operate like a a (sic) group of businesses, each operating independently without reference to anything other than their own bottom lines (2010)

A post in *Think Progress* reflected this idea of government as another commercial operator. In two posts that championed solar technology (2010, 2011), the government’s role was to act as an economic stimulant, by investing more in helping green energy industries get established. Furthermore, *Think Progress* quoted President Barack Obama in an approving manner, when the President mentioned that “the true engine of economic growth will always be...America’s businesses,” where the government “has the responsibility” to let green industries “take hold” (2010). In the same post, it was telling that the importance of green industries was due to the

President “not [being] prepared to cede America’s leadership in the global economy” (2010). *No Right Turn* also touched on the stimulating role that government must play to help establish green industries, as a way of “getting around the chicken and egg problem of ‘no market = no production/infrastructure = no market’” (2008b). This is not to say that regulatory approaches were always framed as negative – *No Right Turn* acknowledged in a post about the Emissions Trading Scheme that “things are looking up...we will finally get...some serious regulatory measures to ban coal-fired power plants...” (2008a). Mostly however, the bloggers in this sample tended to frame the government as another investor or industry actor, whose shareholders were the taxpayers in the respective country. This finding is somewhat supported by the content analysis, which showed that bloggers in this sample preferred financial incentives over government regulation.

In reflecting neoliberal discourse, the political blogs in this emphasised dislike of what they saw as excessive governmental *regulation*, when voluntary individual actions could be *encouraged* through the market instead. The *Dim-Post* for example praised the National-led government’s proposed 5c levy on plastic bags:

One of the things that drove me crazy about Labour was their gut-level Green Party style impulse to ban everything they didn’t like. I think you get a lot further by incentivising peoples (sic) actions than you do by sanctioning and punishing them. (2009b)

Here, governmental regulation through *banning* is framed as *punishment*, in contrast to market-led incentives that still ensure individual freedom of choice - even if such choices do not always produce favourable environmental outcomes. *Kiwi Blog* (2009b) cited an article noting a governmental shift in approach to sustainability – “now it’s all about being the choice of the consumer” – and stated “that is a good thing. And I say that as someone who has been using those lightbulbs before Labour trie (sic) to force us to.” Governments are distrusted to actually govern by *rulemaking*, and instead greater trust is places in market forces, which are seen as more democratic (through an emphasis on “choice”), effective (through an emphasis on the power of consumption), and liberating (through an emphasis on “freedom”, in contrast to prohibiting regulation). These emphases on individual citizens over governments reflects the more widespread “intellectual and policy traditions...[which] promote...the sovereignty of individual choice [that] is so basic to the culture of the industrialized West” (Dovers & Handmer, 1992, p. 267). Many of the political blogs in this sample entrench the idealisation of individual choice through their discourse, thus negating the need for political action, especially from government.

In the content analysis, government was most often identified as the actor either enhancing (39%) or preventing (35%) sustainability, followed by industry (23% and 18% respectively) and individuals (15% and 8% respectively) – see Figure 5.4 and Figure 5.5.

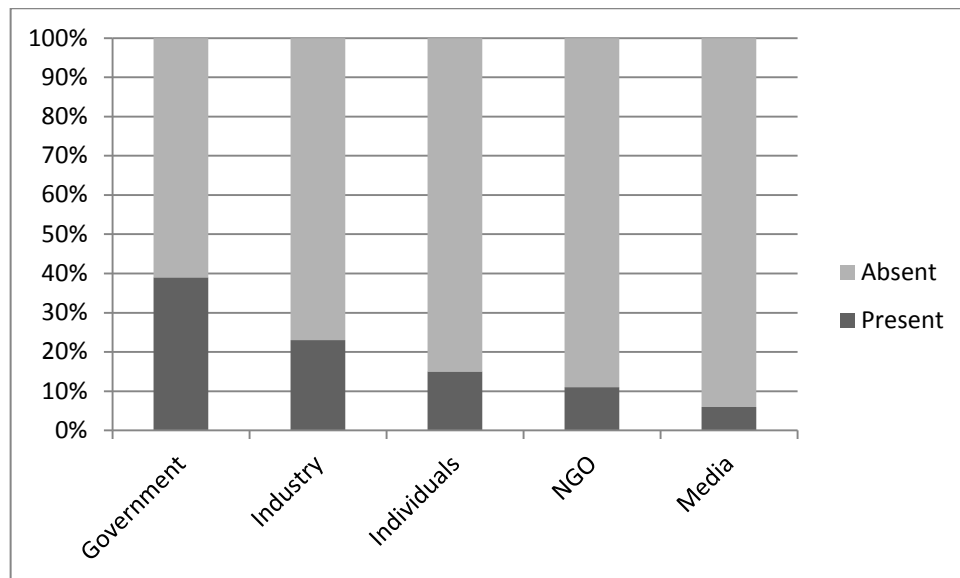


Figure 5.4: Who is enhancing sustainability

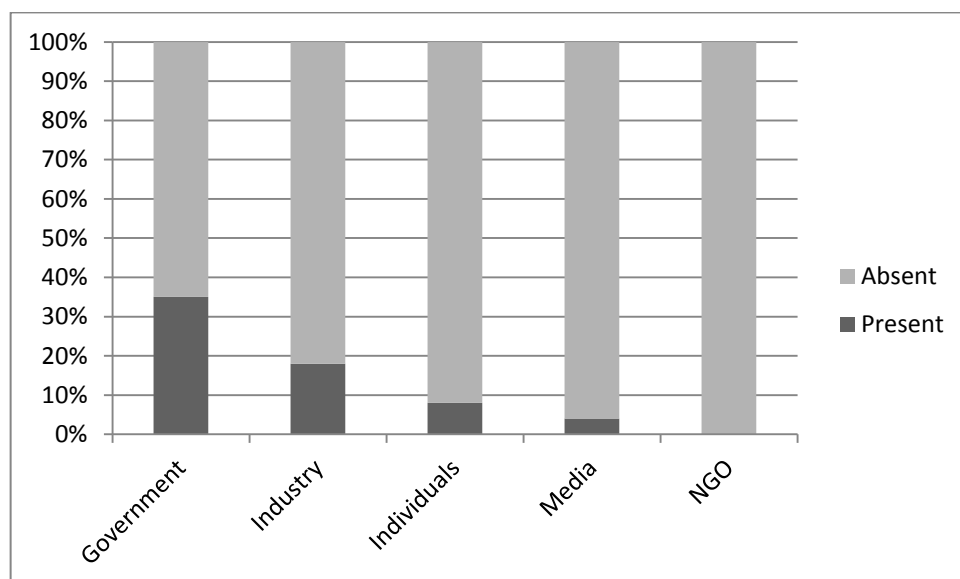


Figure 5.5: Who is preventing sustainability

That all of the actors, except for NGOs, were both seen as enhancing and preventing to similar extents, alludes to the highly contested definition of what is sustainable, and who is therefore taking the correct approach. It also further supports the assertion that bloggers in this sample did not

simply believe in more market/less state, since the government was seen to play such a large, if contested, role in enhancing or preventing sustainability.

While rarely explicitly mentioned in most bloggers' discussions about sustainability, a neoliberal preference for market governance can be seen in the preferred methods advocated to achieve sustainability. These are largely consumer-led: altering the style of consumption (41%), better education and communication (36%) and incentives (whether monetary or "natural" because unsustainability would be unpleasant/less convenient) (31%), see Figure 5.6:

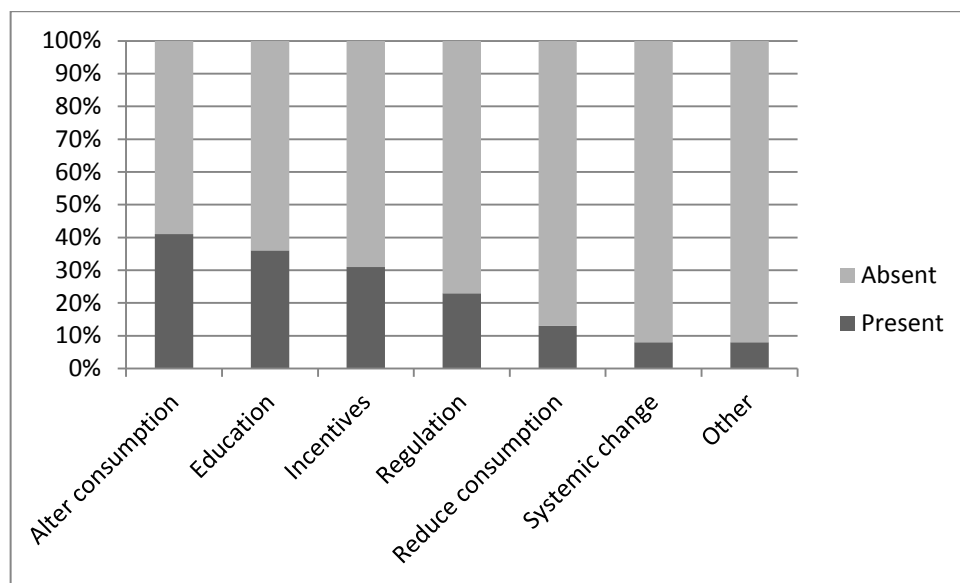


Figure 5.6: How sustainability is enhanced in all posts

These findings suggest that these political blogs do not, most of the time, offer alternative strategies for enhancing sustainability compared to mainstream media, which highlights market mechanisms such as financial incentives (Välvirronen & Hellsten, 2002, p. 230), economic growth and market-accommodating strategies like education (Lewis, 2000, p. 266; 269). Since technological enhancements were included in "alter consumption," these findings further match mainstream media's emphasis on material progress through technology (Shanahan, 1993, p. 185). Furthermore, the political blogs here did not advocate reduced consumption in the vast majority of posts (coded as NA in 87% of posts), despite the importance of reducing consumption in addressing the inequalities of the current economic system, as mentioned in the literature review. Academics have stressed the "systemic nature of the issues of sustainability" (Dovers & Handmer, 1992, p. 275), and the consequent need for systems approaches, rather than inadequate "sectoral or single-issue approaches " (p. 274). However, the blogs here very rarely acknowledged the need for systemic

changes in their discussions about sustainability issues (in only 8% of posts). The most popular strategies are instead commensurable with a neoliberal emphasis on individual action.

The US-based blogs in particular emphasised the importance of individuals and industry in achieving sustainability in their posts about sustainability more compared to the NZ-based blogs⁹. Individuals ($p=.001$) and NGOs ($p=.000$) were seen by the US blogs as enhancing sustainability significantly more than the NZ blogs. The US blogs also emphasised individualised strategies, education ($p=.000$) and changing style of consumption ($p=.014$) significantly more than the NZ blogs. The NZ blogs also sourced government significantly more ($p=.000$) than the US blogs, and talked about them more in both enhancing ($p=.040$) and preventing ($p=.001$) roles. Given that the US blogs are all liberal/left-wing, it is surprising that their attributions of responsibility and the strategies they advocate are more individualised in orientation than the ideologically mixed NZ blog sample. This indicates that individualised answers to sustainability are not exclusive to any political ideology. Other contextual factors should be considered in drawing conclusions about whether a post is “neoliberal” and detrimental to the path towards sustainability.

5.2.3 Individualised answers to sustainability

Even though the content analysis shows that individuals were rarely explicitly mentioned as major agents of change, the discourse analysis revealed that many of the posts advanced individualised narratives for advancing sustainability (such as changing consumption). *Think Progress*, for example, featured guides on how to buy “sustainable seafood,” linking to pocket guides informing consumers which species were fished sustainably so they could avoid the most threatened species (2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011g). Advice included eating less seafood, buying local, and joining Oceana, an NGO, “to help protect the world’s oceans” (Grist, 2009a). *The Standard* featured a post that prompted individuals to “do their part” to behave more sustainably, by linking to a government-sanctioned website (sustainability.govt.nz) providing tips and an open forum on living more sustainably (the formerly interactive, forum-based website has since been closed, and now comprises of a series of booklets) (2007). Another post entitled “Sustainable living resources” (The Standard, 2009) placed the onus on individuals to spearhead sustainability through their own changes to lifestyle, following the “lack of an outcome at Copenhagen” (a global climate change

⁹ Note that, due to the small number of US blogs, the expected counts were often less than 5.

conference). The context (the perceived failure of Copenhagen) is all important. When political blogs espouse market-led strategies, this does not always indicate a negative imposition of neoliberal doctrine. Taking the context into consideration, “sustainable living resources” was an individually empowering alternative way of expressing environmental prudence after the failure of Copenhagen. “Empowerment” was therefore far from straightforward – *Think Progress* wrote about “empowering individuals through sustainable development” (2011e), but this empowerment was enacted through a collective goal (sustainable development). Thus, while the blogs in this sample did largely advocate individualised solutions to sustainability, it does not always follow that these are negative.

While individualised advice can be helpful for frustrated consumers wanting answers and sustainable paths to action, on the other hand there is a drawback to *predominantly* perpetuating individualistic courses of action. These answers for achieving sustainable goals reduce the urgency of more widespread systemic change, and/or suggest that an individual’s power in creating a more sustainable world lies solely and predominantly in their consumption choices. Foucault’s belief that certain discourses can empower or disempower people by defining their roles as certain subjects with certain abilities may be applicable here. While consumers may collectively exercise great power, the fragmented and individualised way this power is effectively exercised can also disempower and neglect other action.

The fragmentation of power can be especially observable when collective efforts to enhance sustainability are reduced to celebrating individuals. *Huffington Post* (2011e) for example publicised the James Beard Foundation Leadership Awards recognising Food Sustainability Pioneers, featuring a photo album with one-sentence descriptions of each individual’s efforts. It also featured a post about “America’s next eco-star,” a competition to showcase the efforts of green minded individuals at various universities (Huffington Post, 2011a). A post in *Think Progress* highlighted the National Resource Defence Council’s Growing Green Awards, publicising “food leaders across America who are transforming the future of food” (2010). These blogs echo the neoliberal emphasis on individuals’ freedom of choice and agency to achieve some goals of sustainability, whether in principle or because more collective efforts have failed.

Individualised discourses indirectly support a neoliberal emphasis on individuals as the main catalysts for sustainability, although this is not to say there are no positive impacts from empowering consumers with information, or celebrating positive sustainable steps that have been taken. However, the discourse in most posts conceptualised individuals as subjects of the state or

consumers in the market, and dispersed any power people might have collectively, by encouraging isolated individual lifestyle choices as the major extent of sustainable action. Highlighting such individual action effectively overlooks the fact that the power to create lasting change is predicated on collective action by the majority, whether this action entails widespread reduced consumption of endangered tuna or a company/organisational-wide commitment to changing aspects of their local food system. The individual focus also repeats the tendency to reduce complex issues to the actions of a few, a disempowering focus which mirrors mainstream coverage of environmental problems (Wilkins, 1993, p. 81). For example, the tendency for blogs to espouse “a highly individualistic narrative” was also found in a study about vaccination discourse in New Zealand, alluding to the more widespread tendency for blogs to focus on the personal (Kenix, 2011, p. 159). In this sense, the political blogs in this sample did not facilitate particularly dissenting discussions about individuals’ roles in shaping a more sustainable world as compared to mainstream media portrayals. It is the repetition and predominance of individualism in conjunction with consumerism that is perhaps of greatest concern.

5.3 Advertising’s influence on bloggers’ sustainability discourse

5.3.1 Limited influences on content

The blogs with advertising in this study did not differ noticeably or consistently in their discussions of sustainability from a neoliberal perspective, as compared to the advertising-free blogs. In the content analysis, neoliberal solutions included financial incentives, and as accommodating strategies, changing style of consumption and education. Advertising-present blogs did advocate significantly more for education ($p=.004$) and changing style of consumption ($p=.041$). Given those findings, one would expect advertising blogs to urge purchases of greener products. Yet, presence of advertising was not significantly associated with advocating for a purchase ($p=.094$). Advertising blogs actually advocated significantly more for systemic change ($p=.015$)¹⁰ compared to advertising-free blogs, which does *not* reinforce neoliberalisation. Advertising-free blogs did not necessarily use their independence from commercial advertisers to advocate for reduced consumption significantly more either, compared to blogs with advertising ($p=.783$). Blogs with advertising did not source industry and businesses significantly more than advertising-free blogs ($p = .136$), but they did use

¹⁰ This may be due to the fact that the few posts that advocated for systemic change came from one blog, *The Standard*, which accepts advertising, as touched on in the qualitative analysis.

NGOs as sources significantly more than advertising-free blogs ($p = .000$) – in 45% of advertising blogs' posts about sustainability. Advertising-present blogs were significantly more likely than advertising-free blogs to note that more could be done to achieve sustainability ($p=.027$). Thus it is difficult to make a strong case that advertising presence resulted in consistently more support for a neoliberal or consumerist approach to solving sustainability in these political blogs. This was unexpected given the research in the literature review stating the overt and subtle ways advertising and commercial imperatives influence media content, even in the blogosphere, to align with industry interests. Perhaps presence of advertising is not a useful metric to categorise blog content according to its alignment with neoliberal, mainstream corporate dialogue, as will be expounded upon in section 5.2.2.

There were inconsistent differences between advertising blogs and advertising-free blogs in terms of who was held responsible for enhancing and preventing sustainability. Advertising blogs did champion individuals (as consumers) as enhancers of sustainability significantly more than advertising-free blogs ($p=.002$), although overall they were only identified as enhancers in 15% of all posts. Governments were identified as enhancers of sustainability in 39% of all posts, but there was no significant difference ($p=.190$) between advertising-present and advertising-free blogs. The second most enhancing group, industry (in 23% of posts), were championed significantly more by advertising-present blogs. Advertising-present blogs considered NGOs ($p=.001$) and the media ($p=.006$) as enhancers of sustainability significantly more than advertising-free blogs, although NGOs and media were overall rarely mentioned as enhancers (11% and 6% respectively). Government are also seen as major preventers of sustainability (in 35% of posts), but advertising-present blogs actually saw them as preventers less than advertising-free blogs ($p=.022$). Industry was the second most cited preventer (18%), but there was no significant difference between advertising-present and advertising-free blogs ($p=.471$). Based on these results, advertising blogs can be considered to champion individuals, industry, NGOs and media more, but they are also less critical of governments. Given that NGOs and industry would be advertising blogs' main sponsors, these two connections may be worth examining further in future research, however in conjunction with the other findings it is difficult to argue that advertising presence consistently produces more neoliberal attributions of responsibility in these blogs.

The predicted effects of commercialisation that advertising has on mainstream news (Hamilton, 2004, cited in Kenix, 2011, p. 125) did not translate easily to these blogs' treatment of sustainability. This might be because many of the blog writers (even those who accept advertising) primarily create

content *voluntarily*, and often as part of a community, therefore there may be less need to self-censor due to pressure from advertisers. Advertisers may approach bloggers, but many bloggers write without receiving compensation anyway. This gives them some power in rejecting requests for changing content. For most mainstream media organisations, advertising accounts for the majority of revenue for most mainstream media organisations (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p. 64). In contrast, advertising income for political bloggers is usually a bonus or supplementary to blogger's full time source of income, and is certainly not lucrative (McKenna, 2007, p. 224). There are some exceptions – *Huffington Post* for example is owned by AOL, but many of the blog post writers do not derive their sole income from writing for the site. Importantly, even independently owned and advertising-free blogs in this sample continued to produce mainstream neoliberal narratives about sustainability, as will be discussed further in section 5.3. As will be shown, whether or not a blog challenges mainstream environmental discourse may depend more on the individual blog's purpose, their personal recognition of commercial pressures, and the *kind* of advertisers they attract.

5.3.2 Blogs as advertising niches

In some cases, content that attempts to challenge mainstream political economic narratives can actually attract certain advertisers (especially non-profit organisations or NGOs) who otherwise may have struggled to find the right media audience niche. These advertisers may not have been able to afford advertising on television, for example, and in any case television audiences may be too general. Advertising on political blogs would be both cheaper and more targeted compared to advertising in mainstream media. This may explain why *The Standard* featured advertising from Greenpeace and another political site *Pundit*. *Think Progress* featured an advertisement for the usa.gov website as a repository for government information, and *Grist* featured advertising from charitywater.org, with the tagline “Water changes everything,” in addition to advertisements for organic rice. Such advertisers are less likely to want to censor environmental messages which might clash with a “buying mood” since the content on such blogs is not created with the *purpose* of sitting alongside corporate advertising. While these sites also contained commercial advertising, their specific audience provided promotional opportunities to smaller NGOs as well. This is in stark contrast to commercial media whose predominantly corporate advertisers would want to support content that creates a “buying mood” (W. Gamson, et al., 1992, p. 377). Some of the advertisers in the political blog sample, such as Lundburg's organic rice, would even benefit directly from some of the articles on *Grist* that critique genetic modification or pesticides in industrial agriculture. A parallel example is Morgan Spurlock's recent documentary *Pom Wonderful Presents: The Greatest*

Movie Ever Sold, which paradoxically critiques marketing in film (featuring scholars such as Sut Jhally and Noam Chomsky), yet is fully funded by corporate advertisers. In a meeting with one of the film's first sponsors, Ban deodorant, the executives note that the documentary's tongue-in-cheek tone fits perfectly with the brand's edgy personality. Thus, advertising-present political blogs that challenge mainstream discourse are part of the much more widespread phenomenon of niche brands trying to market themselves through countercultural media.

This potential for mutually beneficial advertiser-writer relationships might help explain why the blog featuring the largest number of posts explicitly questioning the current neoliberal-leaning economic system also accepted advertising. *The Standard* discussed "the deficiencies in the neoliberal way of doing things" (2010b), and featured another post entitled "Rethinking Growth," stating that "now is the time to question whether it should still be our main aim and guiding light" (2010c). Yet another post entitled "economic reform for sustainability," begins with: "Continual growth in the use of resources is not possible" (The Standard, 2011). The blog also looks at the "strong link between inequality and consumerism," and argues:

Equality does not equal sustainability, but it is much more suited to the task than our current system. Without the constant need to consumer more and more as we compete for status, we use up far less of the earth's resources. (The Standard, 2010a)

This sort of critique of the existing system is rare, because according to the literature, media content that sits alongside advertising will usually have "eluded any meaningful critique of the economic forces behind societal structures" as these are "the very economic forces that benefit multinational media conglomerates" (Kenix, 2011, p. 130). Other scholars have insisted that independent media are also not immune to the influences of advertising (Saks & Harro-Loit, 2006, p. 312). Yet the culture of both *Grist* and *The Standard*, both independent media that advertise, are very much based on critique of the current economic system. For example, a *Grist* post about "why sustainable design sucks" quotes an article stating that "[T]here is no getting over the fact that the majority of product designers earn their living supplying growth-dependent economies with novelties for our ever-more-insatiable appetites" (2011d). Another post states that "for corporations, measuring sustainability mostly means measuring money" (Grist, 2011b). Unlike the other commercial blogs, the writers on *Grist* and *The Standard* display a conscious distrust of industry and conglomeration, and the potential influences these may have over their own content, both in their advertising policies/statements and in their call for donations from readers to supplement revenue.

In the blogosphere, advertising appears to have a different effect on sustainability content compared to what might be expected for mainstream media, perhaps partly because blog ownership is usually independent. This again highlights that the potential of finding challenging or “alternative” discourse on these political blogs may depend mostly on the blogger’s own ideology and/or the ideology of the blog’s readers, rather than binary metrics like the presence of advertising or whether the blog is owned independently. However, there is still a tendency for these blogs to perpetuate mainstream media patterns of bias, by appealing to the communities that form around their blogs in the comments section. Such bias occurs on a grand scale when media outlets “distort information to make it conform with consumers’ prior beliefs,” in an attempt to appear reputable (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006, p. 282). This is of particular significance since bias is more likely to occur in uncertain circumstances, such as “global warming, contexts in which outcomes are difficult to observe and are often not realized until long after the report is made” (p. 282). While the authors state that “competition in the news market can lead to lower bias” (ibid), this “lowering” of bias or increase in quality coverage does not manifest itself straightforwardly in the political blogs here, or other media such as newspapers (Entman, 1989, cited in W. Gamson, et al., 1992, pp. 376-377).

5.3.3 Differences in engagement style

The main difference between the advertising-free and advertising-present NZ blogs was that the former were much more personal and engaging of their readers, however this may not be a direct consequence of advertising presence – the left wing blog *No Right Turn* for example has disabled comments altogether. That aside, the more intense personal interaction on the smaller blogs was likely due to the writing style which catered to more “extreme” left or right wing views. Readers become familiar with the beliefs of the person writing and therefore some values and beliefs could be taken for granted. This produces a clique-y vibe where jargon was used and posts were written so that first-time readers might struggle to understand post content. For example, a post on *No Minister* asked readers: “Remember the Setchelgate affair...” (2007). According to an independent google search, the term “Setchelgate” only ever appeared on *No Minister*, suggesting that the writers knew many of their readers followed right-wing politics and this blog regularly. Comments and posts were frequented by known individuals. Another example was the *Dim-Post* blog post entitled “Berend Bait,” referring to a commenter who often posted sceptical perspectives on climate change related posts. Berend did indeed respond to the post as well, illustrating that commenters were regular and careful readers. Commenters often seemed to have a personal connection to the writers in New Zealand, and would sometimes comment with an expectation that the writer would

read the comment. In a *No Minister* post, commenters expressed their confusion about a post, telling the blogger to “Put us out of our misery Lou” (anonymous) and telling another writer on the blog to “chuck another post up” to explain the content further (2008b). Blog writers in contrast rarely indicated that they read the comments, nor did writers explicitly mention comments in follow up posts. Yet it was the less popular blogs that on rare occasion defied this generalisation. *Home Paddock* (2010a) for example dedicated a post to highlighting a comment left on an earlier post.

The personalised writing style described above has several potential implications in light of past research about audience perceptions of blog credibility. In a study examining blog posts written in an “irreverent, even cynical tone” versus a “straightforward and not very personal” tone, the former was perceived by college students (the study participants) as more trustworthy (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009, p. 449). This was attributed to the writing style being more like “their campus paper” which was perceived as more credible than a community newspaper (p. 449). These findings suggest that audiences may believe unofficial media content such as political blogs more than mainstream content if the blog content is written by “someone who appears to be like them” (ibid). In this case, political blogs may have more influence than mere quantitative figures about readership may imply. This is especially since audiences have an enhanced ability to converse with other like-minded individuals through the blog.

5.4 How political blogs facilitate unique sustainability discussions

5.4.1 Enhancing objectivity through subjectivity

The blogs here differed starkly from mainstream media’s sourcing habits in that their greatest source was actually other media. Figure 5.7, showing media as the most cited source in the blogs in this study (68%), with NGOs (28%) ahead of industry (24%).

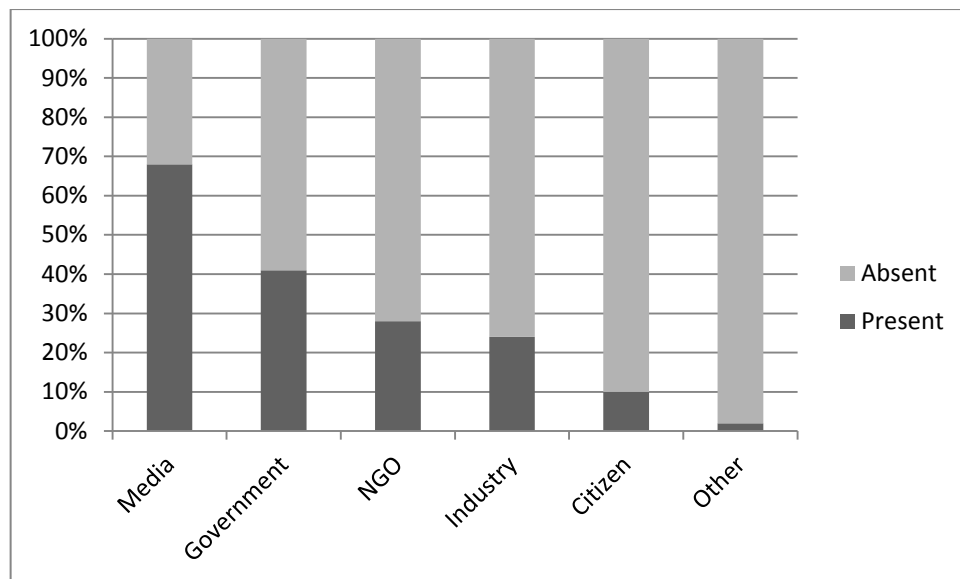


Figure 5.7 Sources mentioned in text or linked to

Few mainstream media outlets would link to or cite other specific journalists and their articles on a regular basis, let alone their competitors. The blogs in this sample implicitly acknowledged subjectivity and opinion diversity in sustainability issues by adding their (sometimes alternative) perspective to mainstream media stories and sources. One recent study that interviewed elite political bloggers found that this desire to provide an alternative perspective to mainstream media was a major motivator for blogging (Ekdale, et al., 2010, p. 224). Yet, as has been noted in another study looking at alternative versus mainstream coverage, using many media sources does not guarantee genuine diversity of *content* and journalistic practice (Kenix, 2011, p. 58). If bloggers are simply perpetuating mainstream content, then the “diversity” they encourage may simply be quantitative, not qualitative.

The political blogs in this study tended to read like tabloid opinion pieces or current affairs shows, rather than news articles in the broadsheet tradition, and made few attempts to appear objective. This finding further discredits the possibility that political blogs may “replace” traditional news or be considered as an alternative. Of course, it may be naïve to consider traditional journalism “objective” for various reasons (see Cooper, 2006, pp. 298-299), as it ignores the way “reporting is always bound up with values (personal, professional, institutional)” (Atton, 2009, p. 272). However if one does not consider blogs as a *replacement*, but rather a *supplement* to mainstream news, then the diversity of partisan views expressed through political blogs may, on the whole, actually enhance the possibility of “multi-perspective objectivity promised, but not actually delivered, by the

mainstream media” (Cooper, 2006, p. 300). Effectively, this multitude of perspectives also reveals more plainly “the social construction of news: there is no master narrative, no single interpretation of events” (Atton, 2009, p. 272). This paradoxical enhancement of “objectivity” through many subjective interpretations is enabled in several ways in this blog sample.

Many of the bloggers in this sample wrote as though their aim was mainly to reaffirm their own beliefs, political “brand”, and the beliefs of their peers, rather than informing the public at large. However, such a writing style is not necessarily a deliberate attempt by bloggers to sweep an objective “truth” under the carpet. It perhaps simply reflects findings about initial motivations for political bloggers, which have in past studies been found to do with a desire to “let off steam,” record thoughts, and “formulate new ideas” (Ekdale, et al., 2010, p. 224). Partisan blogs “attract those seeking kinship” (Lawrence, et al., 2010, p. 143), and like online discussion forums, the posts can be very conversational and idiosyncratic (Malouf & Mullen, 2008, p. 178). In a similar vein to current affairs shows, the blogs in this study resorted to emotive commentary and “moral partisanship” (Cottle, 1993, p. 129). For example, on *No Right Turn*, the blogger notes that a policy to privatise roads will ensure “National’s rich mates and trucking-industry cronies will do very well” (2011). The blogs in this sample generally included very little substantiation, or quotes from the political ideology they opposed, except when they needed an example of how “wrong” the opposition was. Indeed, *NZ Conservative* dedicated an entire post to the headline: “Jeanette admits she was wrong for the last 35 years” (2010a). The post noted the former Green Party co-leader’s decision to prioritise the banning of coal in order to prevent climate change, as opposed to prioritising energy efficiency. The mixing of the personal and political on these blogs may be considered part of blogs’ allure as “unofficial” sources of both hard policy discussion and gossip, uncontrolled by political parties (Hopkins & Matheson, 2005, p. 102). Yet, some scholars ask the pertinent question: “who is served best by the publication of unconfirmed gossip and innuendo about opposing opposition parties” (Audette-Longo, 2009n.p.)?

While these blogs may reinforce the idea of blogs as partisan “bubbles” or echo-chambers, there are also plenty of observed practices in this sample which contradict such a straightforward interpretation. Occasionally a blog post would be addressed to a disagreeing side, which acknowledged the fact that there are always opposing perspectives lurking on the blog, appearing when relevant in the comment section. For example, *NZ Conservative’s* (2009a) post that began with “Note to the Global Warming camp” attempted to pre-empt counter-arguments the writer had experienced in the past. A post in *The Standard* also featured a similar remark: “Right-wing trolls: r0b

had a recent post with links refuting the arguments you're about to make" (2010a). Indeed, a cursory glance at some of the comment sections of these blogs often reveals commenters who frequently disagreed with the stance of the blog author(s). As mentioned before, this is evident in the *Dim-Post's* recognition of a climate change skeptic (Berend de Boer) who regularly commented on climate change topics, which produced the post entitled "Berend bait" (2010a). There is therefore a clear recognition by political bloggers of the "plurality of voices" online (Audette-Longo, 2009, n.p), beyond official sources constantly revisited by mainstream outlets. Other research supporting this include previous observations showing that political bloggers will often comment on other political blogs to voice their disagreement, thus to some extent preventing an "echo-chamber" effect (Balkin, cited in Adamic & Glance, 2005, p. 3). A large study of informal political discussion boards also found that a majority of user links were to someone from the opposite side of the political spectrum (Malouf & Mullen, 2008, p. 185). These findings suggest there is great complexity yet to be explored, perhaps in blog comments, with regards to partisanship.

While overt political bias has obvious negative connotations, there is the *potential* for such open bias to actually be quite useful, depending how audiences and bloggers read blogs. This is because each post allows the full, unfettered and journalist-unfiltered view of each side to be presented on a particular issue. Hence, many blog readers understand that blogs may not be very "fair," but blog content may offer greater depth on certain issues (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, p. 629). Despite the open bias evident in this sample, since many of the posts were critique-oriented, they often linked to the sources they were disagreeing with, as well as other sources. *Grist's* critical evaluation of the Dow Jones Sustainability Index for example links to the official site, but also Google news sites covering the launch of the index, and two experts who discussed the merits of the index (2009b). *Think Progress* shows video of Glenn Beck's "long, exhausting rant" that the rest of the post critiques (2011e). Thus, while studies have found that partisan political bloggers predominantly link to like-minded blogs (Hargittai, Gallo, & Kane, 2008, p. 78; Kenix, 2009, p. 801), political bloggers do still acknowledge, address, and link to the writing of those they oppose, albeit less than they do to those they agree with (Hargittai, et al., 2008, p. 78). Pew research (Horrigan, Garrett, & Resnick, 2004) has shown that the Internet is also good at giving its readers more varied perspectives to read. The ability for readers to access and consider multiple perspectives (Sunstein, 2008, p. 94), without the filter of a journalist could be considered an unintended benefit of open bias in blogging. While blog readers may flock to blogs that reaffirm their own beliefs, there is usually at least some space for the opposition to also protest biased framing (such as in the comments section), as discussed in section 5.4.5.

There are of course limitations to the above claims that political blogs may unintentionally enhance objective readings as a result of the variety of extreme opinions expressed. Sunstein (2008, p. 92) points out that deliberation on political blogs can lead to group polarization whereby deliberators become more extreme in their positions post-discussion, exacerbating ideological divides. Indeed, others have found that blog readers tend to be more polarized than those who follow politics through mainstream news (Lawrence, et al., 2010, p. 141), with a very small minority reading blogs from both sides of the political spectrum (p. 146). Furthermore, even though there may be plenty of dissent on blogs, there is only a small likelihood of dissenting opinions being seriously considered (Sunstein, 2008, p. 93). Thus, “a plurality of cross citations simply cast contempt on the views that are being cited” (pp. 93-94). These occurrences were also observed in this sample, as explored in section 5.1.2.3 discussing explicitly partisan blogs. Yet the fact that productive deliberation is the exception, not the rule, somewhat dampens the optimism about political blogs as indirectly beneficial, variegated, and useful sites of reflection.

5.4.2 Comments and interactivity

The practice of commenting is meant to afford audiences the ability to have some power over crafting of content (Smith, 2010, p. 176), thus having some influence in “meaning production” (Wall, 2005, p. 166). Although commenting is associated with blogs, *No Right Turn* had turned off comments altogether, although some older posts did allow comments. *Huffington Post* and *Kiwi Blog* moderated comments in some form before they went live, and also required users to register with the site first. All the blogs that did allow comments usually had several comments on every post. However, simply having a comments section, and even having readers leave comments, is not in itself an indicator of interactivity. Matheson (2005) notes that, “the more a text refers back to previous things said, acknowledging the ongoing interchange between the participants and responding to that, the more interactive it is” (p. 162). In the blogs analysed, this reference to previous things said by commenters was rarely explicitly visible.

On many of the blogs in this sample, the writers were completely absent from the comments section, particularly the larger sites like *Huffington Post*, perhaps due to the sheer number of comments written and the frequency of satirical comments. As past research suggests, the more blog comments a post receives, the less meaningful and interactive engagement in the comments section will likely be (Kenix, 2009, p. 808). Yet even on the smaller blogs, the writers in this sample very rarely updated their posts as a result of a comment (even though this is easy to do), and rarely

made reference in new posts to past comments. Many of the bloggers in this sample mostly left commenters to talk among themselves. This is in contrast to some past findings suggesting that that “bloggers receiving many comments will comment on their own post in reply to other’s comments” (Ali-Hasan & Adamic, 2007n.p). Readers and commenters of the blogs in this sample conversed in the separate “sandpit” that is the comments section, a playground that half of the blog writers rarely, commented in. Based on the two week observation period, this was especially the case when the blog post had a large number of comments, but there was seemingly no consistent reason as to why a blog writer would respond or assist their readers in expanding on post content. On *Think Progress*, one post contains 44 comments, yet the author does not comment at all (Think Progress, 2011d). Yet in a *Grist* post with far more (88) comments in response to the article, the author, Lisa Hymas, left short comments 5 times (Grist, 2011c). For example, a *Grist* post entitled “is your cheese killing the planet?” (Grist, 2011c) prompted one commenter “Clifford Wells” to ask “why do most poor uneducated folk eat so poorly?” and another commenter “Raincitykitty” to respond with a link to an article from *The Economist* about “food deserts,” which are described as “lack of access to fresh produce unless you have a car.” The commenters on the blogs in this study shared information, debate information and express their own views, quoting others to demonstrate their participation in a conversation, and ask questions of other commenters – practices also found in research dedicated to studying blog comments (Mishne & Glance, 2006; Walker, 2006, p. 7). These findings suggest that writers tend to collaborate in their own sandpits, with readers in another sandpit, but these sandpits are still located within the same playground.

The lack of response to blog comments gives weight to the idea that “it is not the text which is interactive, but the use made of the text” (Matheson, 2005, pp. 173-174). In the case of these blogs, the writers may blog mainly for self-expression, a motivation for many other political bloggers in the US and other countries as well (Ali-Hasan & Adamic, 2007). Another study, for example, showed that the vast majority (83%) of over 10,000 political blogs consisted only of the writer’s commentary in that “the blogger stated his or her opinion...but did not try to mobilize readers or elicit feedback from them” (Wallsten, 2008, p. 26). However, this same study also noted that requests for feedback (1% of posts overall) increased during key moments, such as on the days of presidential debates. This blog sample echoes that pattern which found commenting does not always automatically result in a high level of blogger-reader interactivity, however it may be pertinent to further examine the circumstances that lead to increased blogger interaction with their readers.

Occasionally the comment sections in this post sample *did* facilitate informative discussion about sustainability issues that may otherwise never have happened, and this largely happened between readers/commenters. Conversations in the comments sections that were responsive to former comments made occurred mostly on posts which received only a few comments. It may be reductive to correlate response rate with a numerical value, as the frequency of response is rarely determinable by the number of comments on a post. However, the very presence of comments is worth examining, as they can expose readers to multiple perspectives on an issue, since many commenters also disagree with post content. Sometimes this disagreement sparked unwelcome comments towards dissenting commenters, such as on *Whale Oil's* post about mining, where the writer tells a commenter, Johns: "I am fast getting over your wag the finger pinko attitude...Now fuck off" (2010). It even appears that the blogger removed Johns' comments, as no comments in the post were left by someone with that name. Yet some of the bloggers in this sample, when they engaged dissenting commenters, did so at length with at least some attempt at courtesy. In a *NZ Conservative* post about the scientific consensus of global warming, the writer responded to one of the commenters with "Thanks for the links. It's refreshing for the scientist types to be resorting to Wikipedia – usually they disparage Wikipedia as a source :-)" (2009a). This friendliness was expressed despite the writer disagreeing with the commenter. A *Home Paddock* post on Ngai Tahu's plan for dairy farms provided space for a regular dissenting commenter ("robertguyton") and "Richard," where, even after some disagreement, "Richard" says to "robertguyton": "it would be interesting to hear your views on the environmental/economic issues in general; farming and water in particular" (2011). Another example is a *Dim-Post* (2009b) discussion about plastic bags, where commenters discussed both technical and theoretical problems with policy that banned unsustainable practices, versus policy that used monetary disincentives to reduce unsustainable practices. "Gareth" for example asked:

Why would the "tax" end up with the supermarkets though? While one part of a tax like this is price-based incentive, the other part of it is paying for the mitigation of the perceived negative public good?

If we define the public harm here as being the overall cost of landfill, then the proceeds of the tax should be going to Govt programs to mitigate those, not supermarket profits, surely. (Dim Post, 2009b)

While the author occasionally responded, the commenters largely facilitated the conversation by themselves. This somewhat counters the observation that sporadic blogger involvement in the comments section "removes *any* possibility of a meaningful, communicative exchange" (Kenix, 2009,

pp. 808, emphasis added). It is important to acknowledge, however, that even if these conversations are productive, they are mere fragments within an overwhelmingly large number of other (perhaps not-so-productive) conversations (Lawrence, et al., 2010, p. 142). Blog comments and discussions are also not used by governing bodies in crafting better policy. However, they nevertheless facilitate knowledge exchange with low barrier to entry, where anyone's voice can be heard. Even with the aforementioned limitations, these conversations may better inform both political decision making and some views on policy approaches to achieving sustainability. These are undoubtedly importance spaces given that sustainability is so rarely mentioned in mainstream media.

The scarcity of the above forms of reflexive interactivity may be attributable to the nature and main purpose of most political blogs. The rarity of bloggers inviting feedback and responding to comments from readers may be also due to the tendency for political bloggers to have "firm ideas of the problems in the world" (McKenna, 2007, p. 215). In the rare instances that bloggers in this sample responded to comments, it was often to defend themselves and point out the perceived ridiculousness of a commenter, as was the case in a *Grist* thread about "conservative white men" (Grist, 2011a) being a barrier for achieving environmental progress. The author responded to a commenter pointing out the "racist" tone of the post with the following: "The piece refers to a study in a peer-reviewed journal documenting the behavior of conservative white men. Is the study racist too?" (Grist, 2011a). The defensive nature of such blogger responses suggests that these bloggers write with the intention of influencing, rather than learning through interacting with their readers. This has led to stipulations that political blogging is more about facilitating expression over participation (Wallsten, 2005, p. 5), and indeed this is reflected in the nature of the bloggers' responses to inflammatory comments as noted in the *Grist* example. While political blogs have the *potential* to activate democratic political participation and/or deliberation, it may largely depend on the individual blogger's purpose as to whether this potential is actually utilised.

While bloggers rarely link to or reference comments made on their posts (at least on sites where each comment has its own permanent link, or permalink), the larger websites (such as *Think Progress* and *Huffington Post*) do call for readers' contributions in the form of news tips. The extent to which the writers at such sites utilise such contributions is difficult to ascertain, as no reference was made to news tips in posts. Research into the practices of the bloggers at such sites about this practice would perhaps be more accurate at determining any correlation, but since it is not common practice to state whose idea a blog post is, this observational study was unable to fully acknowledge these less visible forms of audience interaction.

5.4.3 Linking

Blogs in this sample demonstrated a point of difference from mainstream news websites in their linking practices. Most of the blogs in this sample (75%) contained some sort of “blogroll,” which linked to other blogs or news sites that the writer(s) claim to frequent, source from or simply recommend to readers. As has been found in other studies of blog linking behaviour, the blogrolls were mostly on a sidebar, in the footer, or on a dedicated page accessible through the menu of the site, thus either being permanently on every page or on the homepage (as was the case for the large US blogs) (Ali-Hasan & Adamic, 2007). The three exceptions were *Think Progress*, *The Dim-Post*, and *Whale Oil*. Sometimes the blogroll also linked to sites that have opposing ideological perspectives. This feature sets political blogs apart from mainstream commercial news or politics sites, which at present rarely dedicate precious permanent page space towards advertising their competitors for free. The significance of linking to external sites “help contribute to a model of knowledge in which the truth of what is happening in the world cannot be channelled exclusively through one news text” (Matheson, 2005, p. 165). Blogrolls, especially in conjunction with comments, also dilute the effect of atomisation and isolation of blogging communities (Koop & Jansen, 2009, p. 170). Regardless of the inherent biases that may be present in political blog post content, blogrolls acknowledge that the nation, and world, has diverse values, perspectives and ideologies beyond those expressed on the blog.

An unexpected finding during the ethnography of this blog sample was that several blogs in the sample (see, for example, *No Minister*, 2008b; *Whale Oil*, 2007) published posts without a single link. This is potentially significant given past research claims that “a low degree of linking would substantiate the view of blogging as atomistic” (Koop & Jansen, 2009, p. 169). Yet the fact that some posts contained no links was also not necessarily indicative of their independence from mainstream media. A closer look at the topics discussed by *No Minister* reveals that, despite not linking to other sources, the writers were still clearly discussing issues or stories that the mainstream media were covering at the time. This is unsurprising given past research showing that the public (including bloggers) perception of the importance of an issue is often strongly correlated with the amount of associated media coverage and political elite statements (Wallsten, 2005, p. 7). Both New Zealand and US studies have also found that bloggers followed media agendas more often than they set them, or the two were at least highly correlated (Hopkins & Matheson, 2005, p. 99; Lee, 2007, p. 753). Other studies have found no strong or consistent correlation between the amount of posts a political blog has about an issue and the extent of mainstream coverage of that same issue

(Wallsten, 2005, pp. 17-18). However, the influence of political bloggers on mainstream agendas cannot be totally disregarded since some popular bloggers even have their own columns in the mainstream media, such as David Farrar (author of *Kiwi Blog*), who contributes to the *New Zealand Herald*. There is also evidence of journalists and political elites following popular bloggers (Hopkins & Matheson, 2005, p. 101). Regardless, political blogs have been found to primarily link to mainstream media sites over any other sources, including other blogs (Hyun, et al., 2007, p. 249; Kenix, 2009, p. 804; Wallsten, 2005, p. 21). Given their constant reference to the “focal points” the mainstream media provide, blogs are highly unlikely to be able to replace the media (Leaning, 2011, p. 97). Instead, this study confirms past conclusions that political blogs are perhaps better conceptualised as *part* of the “media ecology” rather than separate or alternative to it (p. 98).

5.4.4 Collaboration through sharing

While blogs have generally been considered to be written by individuals (Herring, et al., 2005, p. 150), half of the blogs in this sample were written by multiple authors. Popularity, prevailing ideology, or commerciality did not predict whether an individual or a group of bloggers wrote the blog. In this sample it was the collaborations between writers (both between and within blogs) that tended to be based on mutual assistance, identity or ideology. Simply linking to each other’s posts can increase blogger credibility as a noteworthy source, share information (“pingbacks” can let a blogger know when another blogger has linked to them), provoke discussion and allow readers to follow the trail. This informs the conceptualisation of blogs as a community-creating space “especially for those who think of them-selves as online intellectuals who seek more in-depth analysis than what is available through traditional media” (Kaye, 2006, p. 130). While readers can also exhibit this relationship with writers (Pole, 2009, p. 17), the blog writers in this study overwhelmingly tended to refer to other blog writers in their posts, rather than commenters on their own blog. Therefore the political blogs in this sample were sometimes informally collaborative, but very rarely with their readers. These tentative findings would benefit from a separate quantitative study, as it was beyond the scope of the analyses in this research.

As other forms of social media have developed, blogs have kept pace by increasing the ways in which readers can share and further discuss blog content. All but two blogs in this sample (*No Right Turn* and *No Minister*) had some sort of button automatically attached to every post, allowing readers to share or “like” the post through one of the following: email, Facebook, Twitter, StumbleUpon, Google+, the blog host (eg. WordPress), Scoop (a New Zealand based news website),

LinkedIn, Reddit, and many other content-sharing sites. Some examples are shown in Figure 5.8, Figure 5.9, and Figure 5.10 below:

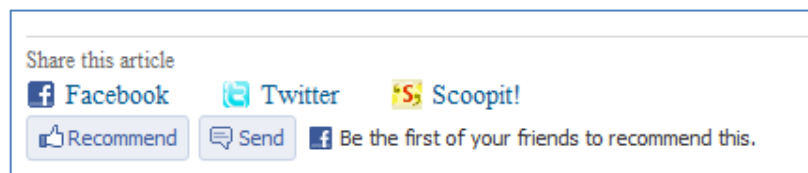


Figure 5.8 Sharing options on *The Standard*

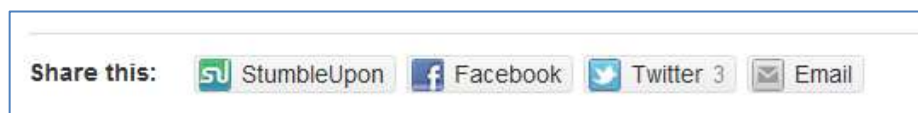


Figure 5.9 Sharing options on *Home Paddock*

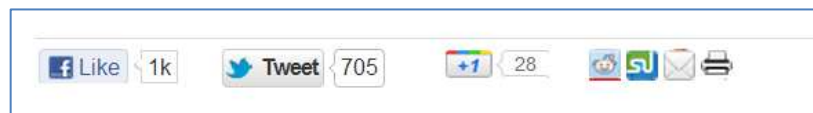


Figure 5.10 Sharing options on *Grist*

Huffington Post and *Think Progress* also allowed readers to share or comment on the blog through Facebook. An example of the comment sharing features on a *Huffington Post* blog post are shown in Figure 5.11 below:

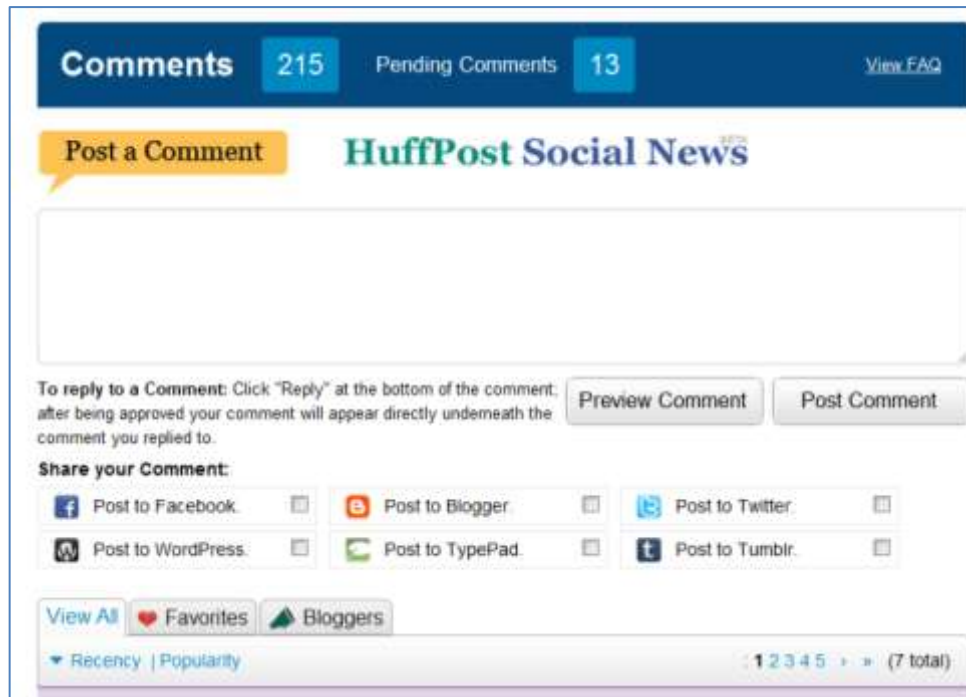


Figure 5.11 Commenting features on *Huffington Post*, showing the options for sharing, viewing and rating comments

Sharing can extend content and conversation beyond the blog itself into readers' other networks (such as personal networks in Facebook), often expanding the readership of the blog post (and therefore a certain issue or argument) well beyond its regular readers. This could include friends of the readers, and then friends of friends. Even before such sharing buttons were possible, one study traced conversations generated by a blog post, showing that others blogged about it and subsequently stirred conversation in other blog's comments (see de Moor & Efimova, 2004). In the observational study here, links in posts and the search-ability of blogs could also make it easier to pick up a long-running political story. Furthermore, when users post the link of a story on their wall on Facebook for example, this appears on all of their friends' newsfeeds. The *Huffington Post* even enables "social reading" through Facebook, whereby readers automatically "share" what articles they have read on the site through a status update, negating the need for manual sharing of articles that have been read. The number of ways to share is growing, noticeable even when looking at the blogs again several months after the initial study. Sharing capabilities like these *somewhat* counter the idea that one researcher posed about political blogs only catering to those who would engage in political conversations anyway (Singer, 2005, p. 175), because a post may unintentionally start conversations beyond the blog itself. However, the occasional reference to other political bloggers in many of the blogs studied and the heavy use of acronyms (such as "DPF," the initials of Kiwi Blog

writer David Farrar, or “GOP,” “Grand Old Party”/Republicans) suggests that some of the bloggers in this sample know their core or regular readers are politically interested already. Yet even though bloggers may direct their posts toward politically-interested readers, there is growing evidence that the arguments, ideas and critique contained in these posts will travel far further than the blog’s regular readers or subscribers. Again, this observational study was not sufficient to measure the extent to which sharing catapults a blog post’s readership, and is somewhat outside the scope of the content analysis, but may be worth examining in future research.

5.4.5 On and offline practices

The findings here demonstrate that technologies by themselves do not *produce* new practises, but the practises that the technology *enable* can be considerably novel. During this study, it became clear that the technical capabilities of blogs enable different and “new” types of discussion when compared to more formalised face to face political conversation. The blogs in this study were seen to enable their writers and readers to find like-minded perspectives on a larger scale and converse, and equally, to find opposite-minded perspectives and easily penetrate those communities to challenge their discourse. It is perhaps this feature which has led some to claim the Internet enhances communication and socialising based on common interest (eg. politics), even if bloggers themselves do not always set out to do this (Ali-Hasan & Adamic, 2007), and even if those conversing do not always agree. During this observational study for example, the comments sections on some of these blogs appeared to enable various people claiming to be from different cities in the same country, to discuss a national issue. These demonstrated capabilities to engage with people who otherwise might not have a voice in the public domain, can facilitate a renewed interest in politics, however informal that interest may start out. The cross-border and public accessibility of blogs, which contain archived posts for access at any time, can also give readers the opportunity to easily access past commentary on present issues.

When examining the social conventions of political conversation on these blogs versus ideals of face-to-face conversation, starker differences emerge. One does not need to know those who started or are participating in a conversation (through commenting on a post), as comments are almost always to anyone reading, not a specific person. Even if the comment is addressed to a specific person (such as the author of the blog post, or in response to another commenter), it is acceptable for anyone to answer, since blog writers so rarely responded to comments (even those directed at them). The fact that blog readers do not ever need to know anyone conversing on the

blog they are about to comment on also makes it easier to join conversations one wishes to oppose, and point out flaws in arguments or suggest alternate views. A consequence of this effect is that the political blogs here demonstrate Cooper's (2006) point that:

blogs reduce the inhibitory effect of public opinion contrary to an individual's personal viewpoint, by making evidence readily available through hyperlinking and blogrolling that one, in fact, is not along in that viewpoint. (p. 286)

Other "inhibitory effects" that offline political conversation may present, such as not knowing anyone at the party, or not wanting to appear overzealous or rude, are heavily reduced (although there are negative consequences of these low barriers, as will be discussed below). Perhaps the most blunt example of the lack of barrier to entry for those disagreeing with a blog is an anonymous commenter who often opposes the posts in *Grist* (using the name "Simon" in this post), who commented: "I've been locked out of Grist comments section before...Not to worry. If they lock me out, I'll just register under a different email address and be right back here" (2011a).

The lack of face-to-face contact through blog conversation also had negative spinoffs in that commenters were sometimes ruder than they might otherwise be, sometimes reducing the conversation to petty or divisive comments. As Alterman (2008) notes, dissenting comments can sometimes be insightful, "but many resemble the graffiti on a bathroom wall" (n.p). The *Huffington Post* for example inspired a slew of insulting comments about *Fox News* in a post about *Fox's* global warming coverage. These included: "Fox News is there to mislead people and that is their only purpose" (this commenter had 3204 "fans" according to their profile), and: "I didn't realise that Fox News knew what a fact was," which received the following response: "Well, in theory they have to, in order to keep their lies straight" (Huffington Post, 2011d). These political blogs could be conceived as a kind of politically-oriented pub, where "the online networks that blogs create are...analogous to the personal networks within which people engage in political discussion" (Lawrence, et al., 2010, p. 144). Like a pub, the political affiliations and tone of the blog are expressed through the aesthetic of the blog, its slogan, choice of names, graphics, and/or its colour scheme. The depth of discussion usually reflects the kind of casual political conversation one might have at a pub or bar, including attempts at satire, sarcasm and drunken incoherence, as alluded to in a past study (Kenix, 2009, p. 808). However, the delay in commenting also allows replying commenters a longer time to process what others may have said to them, potentially resulting in a calmer, more thoughtful response. Interviews with frequent blog commenters would be particularly valuable in exploring these possibilities further.

Along with the insults, the blogs in this sample also facilitated unique discussions about sustainability (or politics more generally) outside mainstream portrayals, as “the frames of the established journalists no longer constitute[d] the master narrative of current events” (Cooper, 2006, p. 286). On *Grist* for example, the topics of posts are often based on a critique of what the authors see as mainstream “myths” and thus *the entire site* is dedicated to producing content that is challenging to mainstream environmental discourse (hence *Grist’s* motto “a beacon in the smog”). However, there were still a surprising number of commenters who presented counter-arguments in many of the articles. This trend tended to exhibit itself on blogs with less than 100 comments on average, so the blog writer could presumably have time to read and reply to some of the comments. Yet there was evidence of commenters who generally opposed or questioned the blog’s views on a semi-regular basis, whether on left-leaning or right-leaning blogs (although no right-leaning blogs in the US were in the sample). An example of a frequent disagreeing commenter on *Home Paddock* (found during the discourse analysis rather than the observational study) is robertguyton, who managed to respectfully engage the author of the blog and other commenters about what “sustainable” agriculture might mean (Home Paddock, 2011).

An advantage of the lack of shared physical space is that anyone can engage in multiple, full conversations with different commenters on multiple posts, and a third commenter can support one of two already conversing commenters, and contribute another view. A conversation from a *Grist* post about “conservative white men,” for example, prompts a comment from “Simon” that attracts criticism from “Trollwacker,” “SkyHunter” and “ridgeclimber,” but then “Dave from Canada” lends his support to “Simon,” and the reply prompts more engagement from “SkyHunter” (see Grist, 2011a). This discussion demonstrated the ability to fully keep track of all the conversation that happens in a given post. In face-to-face conversation, it is almost impossible to listen, and respond to, the conversations between ten or so people happening at the same time. Every commenter also at least has the opportunity to finish what they want to say. This is not to say that everyone will fully read every comment, and the drawback of an overabundance of commentary is that much is produced but not everything is read. However, the *ability* to converse fully is a generally positive feature of blogs that should at least be acknowledged. This ability also somewhat satisfies the “operating rules” in the aforementioned Habermasian notion of the public sphere, of open participation without interference. Those wanting to fully articulate an alternative, minority view can do so and rebut dissenting responses without having to worry about being cut off.

Blogging can be conceived of as a hybrid, where offline practices have become mixed with online conventions (Herring, et al., 2005, pp. 160-161), and in this sense, they are not necessarily always creating content or conversation that would otherwise not have existed offline. This is why not all scholars consider blogs as genuinely new or unique, in the sense that they often simply reproduce aspects of existing offline practices in conjunction with online ones (Herring, et al., 2005, p. 144). It is worth considering for the purposes of this thesis given that, without political blogs, political conversation would still be happening. Furthermore, online and offline should not be considered as neatly separate – “What happens via new technology is completely interwoven with what happens face-to-face and via other media” (Baym, 2009, p. 721). Thus, while some of the political blogs in this sample demonstrate “new” capabilities in facilitating political discussions, it is important to “interrogate the underlying dynamics through which technology use is patterned across media, relationships, and communicative purposes” (ibid, emphasis added).

5.4.6 Replacing or complementing the fourth estate?

In the observational analysis of the blogs in this sample, several of the large sites, particularly the US ones, raised a few questions about what exactly defines a blog compared to a news website, as both have adopted conventions from each other. This reflects a broader convergence whereby mainstream journalists and alternative media adopt practices from each other (Kenix, 2011, p. 163). *Huffington Post* for example is a very large and popular site that started out as a news aggregation site but also contains a collaborative blog (written in part by celebrities) and hires a small news staff of its own (Alterman, 2008). Each news story that is hosted within the site has a comments function, and it can be difficult to distinguish between blog posts and news stories. The ability to leave comments on stories has been simulated by many online versions of many newspapers as well (ibid). Alterman (2008) predicted that, as a result of political blogs, “we are about to enter a fractured, chaotic world of news, characterized by superior community conversation but a decidedly diminished level of first-rate journalism” (n.p). The political blogs in this sample do somewhat reflect this prediction, in that they facilitate a lot of political conversation. However, whether such conversation is based on information that is well-researched or a result of original reporting is another matter.

Hopkins and Matheson (2005) made an astute observation that “blogging requires its readers to take the chaff with the wheat” (p. 104), but with a larger and more competitive pool of bloggers, the top blogs generally become more professionalised as they need to compete with a greater number

of other blogs, and begin to attract advertisers and staff with professional standards. This observational study confirms their suggestion that the popular US political blogs are more professionalised in their approach compared to their New Zealand counterparts, who are part of a much smaller political blogosphere. Professionalism was reflected in both style and substance in this blog sample. For example, the less professional blogs used categories and tags to organise posts, but the more professional blogs had menu bars that had been custom designed to organise content on their site, that resembled mainstream news layouts. Not only were the US sites laid out more like news sites – they also contained posts that appeared as original reporting, and linked to a far wider variety of websites in their posts, which suggests that each post is more thoroughly researched. Posts resembled articles that included lots of hyperlinking as forms of referencing. *Think Progress* even used journalistic tropes to indicate original reporting, such as “CAP’s Ben Kaldunski has the story” (2010). Commenters did not appear to expect a response from the writer on these large blogs, but did expect an audience out of other commenters, posting links, facts and claims that build on or refute post content. On *Huffington Post*’s article about green jobs for example, one user, “vetxcl” posted several links to other sites they felt was related to the content, and responded to the comments of several others with relevant links (2011f). On *Huffington Post* many commenters also had their Twitter accounts automatically included in their user account, which also allows readers to see other comments the user has made on that site. Yet overall, the high response rate on the US advertising blogs here resulted in less blogger-reader interaction than on the New Zealand advertising blogs. *Grist* urged their readers on the home page to “support independent green news” (emphasis mine). The New Zealand bloggers on the other hand made no attempts to hide their subjectivity or position as mere commentators of mainstream content, basing many posts simply as a critique of a mainstream media story. With the possible exception of *The Standard*, the New Zealand top blogs looked like they just used an existing blogging platform template or blog layout.

While the US news sites/blogs may be more professional, they too still have major limitations to their ability to replace mainstream media news outlets, even if this is not their intention. The perspectives and content on all the blogs in this study continue to be decidedly one-sided, producing what Alterman rightly calls “a cluster of communities, each engaged in its own kind of “news”—and each with its own set of “truths” upon which to base debate and discussion” (2008, n.p). This is no longer an exclusively American phenomenon either, where blogs are oriented towards one of the two large parties (Pole, 2009, p. 17). The New Zealand political blogs in this sample also often support either right or left wing parties (even by their very name, as indicated by *No Right Turn*). While this hampers the end goal of the public sphere to reach consensus, the ability to find

communities of support further helps individuals speak out on issues they may have formerly thought they were alone in. The *Dim-Post*, as the only “centre” blog which has supported parties from both left and right leaning parties, attracts a comparatively diverse set of readers and debates, but this attempt at middle ground is in the minority. The blog is still written by an individual whose main fact checking mechanism (presumably) constitutes the commenters on that blog, who have an inconsistent incentive to perform accuracy checks. Though blogs allow opposing views to collide, there is no guarantee (or indication) that these collisions will produce a large enough “middle path” to move forwards on political issues. However, that may not be the point of these blogs anyway.

The “wild frontier ethos of blogs” (Cooper, 2006, p. 287) and their sheer diversity and inclusivity may be where their main uniqueness and importance lies in the aspirations to a public-sphere-model of political discussion. The findings of this observational study are congruent with Cooper’s argument that blogs, while not guarantors of quality debate, are primarily important in that they encourage participation in crafting discourse (2006, p. 287). Their effective removal of a major barrier towards participation in political life may not constitute the arrival at the ideal public sphere, but “moves us closer to the ideal” (Cooper, 2006, p. 287) in an institutionalised, yet unofficial and untraditional way. There are examples countering Cooper’s assertion that “no interference is possible” (p. 288) in blog discussions, as blog comments are turned off altogether (as in the case of *No Right Turn*), or moderated. Yet one could also rebut that there are in turn plenty more tools in which people can create their own discourse in their corner of the web. As imperfect as these political blogs may be, their role in improving participation in political discussion should not be totally discounted.

6 Discussion

6.1 How political blogs discuss sustainability

In the sample studied here, political bloggers continued to write about sustainability issues rarely, superficially, and in a distanced, overwhelmingly passive way. Sustainability was not so much a necessary global goal for prolonged human survival as it was a personally dividing concept. The personalised nature of some of this criticism makes “sustainability” seem like it is a special interest concern, one that divides people not on objective measures but personal values (much like a sports team or brand). This may be why the expected ideological commitments to sustainability were not consistently reflected in the content analysis, and why explicitly partisan bloggers were oppositional about so many things unrelated to actual policy – from the characterisation of “greenies” and “pinkos” as hypocrites and fools, to the characterisation of large industries and right-wing governments as greedy and corrupt. This is not to imply that liberal and conservative bloggers have the same approach to achieving sustainability, but merely that their content, and the nature of that content, was often personalised and rarely substantive.

It is difficult to draw concrete conclusions about the reasons behind the rarity of environmental discussion in these political blogs (given that discussions were so rare, and it may be unwise to read too much into them), however some are made tentatively here for future researchers to consider. As touched on in the literature review, neoliberalism and environmentalism have experienced tensions and yet also more recently environmentalism has absorbed neoliberal approaches. In light of these processes, the relative rarity of sustainability discussion could be seen as the power of neoliberalisation to subsume and de-problematize environmental quandaries. As mentioned in section 5.2, if the market is of supreme importance, and can, through distanced individual actions, “save the environment,” then the need to discuss the *politics* of environmental issues is vastly diminished. This may also help explain why the nature of the content in this study was so personalised, rather than political.

6.2 Neoliberalism in sustainability discourse

The political bloggers in this sample rarely challenged neoliberal discourse about sustainability. Many *reinforced* the prioritisation of the market as a form of governance in achieving sustainable outcomes, despite the many inadequacies of doing so, as mentioned in the literature review. The overall paucity of content that defied neoliberal strategies for achieving sustainability may be due to

a wider societal acceptance of neoliberalisation, which also helps explain the popularity of these blogs since they, for the most part, resonate with accessible mainstream attitudes and values.

Gramsci's conceptualisation of hegemony is useful in understanding the widespread promulgation of neoliberal values and beliefs in this blog sample. Originally devised "as a means to understand and to explain the strength and the resilience of modern bourgeois society" (Fontana, 2006, p. 27), it is also helpful in explaining the power of neoliberalisation. Hegemony operates through obtaining widespread consent to certain leadership, where intellectuals maintain the moral and cultural system that fosters consent from society (p. 29). Consent minimises "force and violence" by embedding moral and cultural values that become accepted as ethical, rational and productive (p. 34). Gramsci observed that the ideas behind free trade and market competition promulgated an organic distinction between state and civil society. Gramsci does not subscribe to this distinction, but argues that this manufactured distinction lead to the assertion that economic activity belongs to civil society, and therefore the state should not intervene or regulate the activity (p. 32). The widespread subscription to these beliefs renders the market as the regulatory body (ibid). Indeed, belief in the supremacy of market forces in determining individual choice was seen in many of the political blogs in this sample. The acceptance and reproduction of the neoliberal discourse that sees the market as the best form of governance demonstrates consent, and consequentially gives power to the market to act as regulator.

Invoking hegemony does bring up the question of "how consent is actually secured" (Barnett, 2005, p. 9). This has led to warnings against "thinking of "neoliberalism as a coherent "hegemonic" project," and creating theoretical opposition between "left" and "right," or "collectivism" and "individualism" (ibid). To attribute the discussions of the political blogs in this sample to a vague, ever-changing yet definitive class "project" would be stretching the limits of the evidence presented here, and it would ignore the nationally specific cultural and social agency of the bloggers analysed. Indeed, the evidence here shows that those from both the left and right of the political spectrum advocated individualistic approaches to sustainability, and these approaches are not, by themselves, inherently undesirable. "Hegemonic neoliberalism" may therefore by itself be inadequate in explaining how these political blogs express acquiescence to neoliberalisation of nature. However, it is not entirely useless in conjunction with specific explanations about how "consent" might have arisen, keeping in mind the effects of wider social and cultural factors that may encourage widespread consent.

The distinction between state and civil society is still particularly relevant to the way blogs expressed neoliberal conceptualisations of government's roles in achieving sustainability. The content analysis showed that governments were often mentioned as major actors both enhancing and preventing sustainability. More qualitatively, bloggers mostly appeared to believe that the government should behave like a private business. government had obligations to invest and aid green industries, but mostly because this was good for the wider economy. In line with neoliberal rhetoric, the economy and market forces are essentially idealised as the most representative form of societal governance, as opposed to government representing its citizens. Indeed, even liberal or left-wing blogs, which entrust governments to regulate industry and represent the people, perpetuated the idealisation of market supremacy. Perhaps this is in part because governments have been frequently seen to fail to protect the environment. However, the failure of *businesses* to adequately respond to environmental problems received nowhere near the same level of scrutiny. Distrust of government is echoed in the commercial media, which emphasise the deficiencies of government on a more general political level, while generally avoiding critique of industry (Kenix, 2011, p. 130). This distrust is also reflected through citizens in a recent survey showing that the greatest reason New Zealanders did not vote in the 2011 general election (which had the lowest voter turnout in over 120 years) was a distrust of politicians (Davison, 2012, n.p). Yet, as mentioned in the literature review, there are serious problems with relying predominantly on market governance to solve environmental problems. While government may have its weaknesses, it is still one of the most directly accountable representatives of the citizenry, and is only further weakened in its ability to protect its citizens when those citizens decide to express their voice primarily as consumers instead.

The fact that the public are largely ignoring their power as citizens is significant as the mainstream media, governments, industry and political blogs may not be accurately reflecting widespread concerns about the environment. Global public concern about the environment has been increasing in the last decade, according to various opinion polls and surveys (Hansen, 2010, p. 164). In New Zealand, a 3News Reid Research poll of 21,000 voters showed that in 2011, the environment was the most important issue to voters in the New Zealand national elections (Garner, 2011). It may not be coincidental that in the same year, the Green Party of New Zealand won a relatively high proportion (11%) of the vote in the 2011 election (ElectoralCommission, 2011), with a campaign focussing on "priorities that will help deliver a richer New Zealand" (Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2011). This tendency for some liberal/left wing blogs in this study to also express environmental concerns as relatively secondary to economic concerns is perhaps reflective of wider political tendencies in New Zealand. The Green Party's billboard campaigns for 2011

featured imagery of a young boy with natural scenery in the background, attempting to encapsulate the various meanings of “rich” beyond material wealth. However, the campaign could also be interpreted as the Green Party’s emphasis on ensuring economic prudence in conjunction with their environmental goals. The second line on their “issues” web page states that “the fiscal implications of the Green Party’s priorities for 2011-2014 are revenue positive” (Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2011), perhaps in recognition that “paying” for policies are of major concern to voters. These other political patterns may help explain the greater presence of government as a source, enhancer and preventer in the NZ political blog sample, as compared to the US blog sample.

It is pertinent to acknowledge in this study that the environmental reputation of New Zealand is also significantly tied to its economic performance. Sustainability is an important agricultural consideration (Aerni, Rae, & Lehmann, 2009, p. 228), which may explain the popularity of blogs like *Home Paddock*. “Clean, green, and 100% PURE” is also New Zealand’s tourism slogan, reflecting a history of pride in the country’s “pristine, beautiful and abundantly productive environment,” with tourism contributing to 10% of GDP (Bell, 2008, p. 346). However, Bell’s (2008) study revealed that small tourism business owners (specifically backpacker owners) in New Zealand did little to “match practice to image,” with only 1 out of 25 having written any environmental policy (p. 349). Tellingly, the main reason for current environmental practices cited by the backpacker owners in Bell’s study was “cost effectiveness” (p. 350). Economic imperatives are therefore still one major reason that many New Zealanders care about environmental sustainability. In conjunction with the “corporately branded versions of [New Zealand’s] national identity” (Hope, 2012, p. 45), it should perhaps not be so surprising then that the popular citizen-produced political blogs studied here reflect the values of the places they originate from. This applies to the US blogs to an extent as well, which were shown to be far more individualistic in their approach to sustainability – a finding reflective of the literature that views the US as a “highly individualist culture,” even though considerable variation exists within the US in terms of this tendency (Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2001, p. 348). There are therefore major contextual factors that have affected both the US and New Zealand’s widespread acceptance and consent to the neoliberalisation of nature, whether in discourse or policy.

The variation of the US and NZ blogs’ expressions of neoliberalisation of the environment raises theoretical uncertainty about the existence of a uniformly definable idea of “neoliberalism” to explain constructions of sustainability. The observed variation suggests that “actors in various parts of the world have enacted *their own* neoliberal policies in relation to specific sets of people, places, natural resources, industries, and so on” (Castree, 2006, p. 4, emphasis original). Consequently, the

blogs studied here should perhaps be considered as distinct articulations that develop their own neoliberalisations, in conjunction with socially contextual factors (whether it is a clean green image, or a history of individualism). However, despite the differences between US and NZ blogs in neoliberal expression, “substantial commonalities of process and outcome occur” (Castree, 2006, p. 5). Qualitatively, both US and NZ blogs overwhelmingly entrenched the process of disengagement from the role of citizen, while also naturalising the grand importance of the economy and markets as a form of governance over sustainable development. Quantitatively, both US and NZ blogs deprioritised the reduction of consumption and systemic change. Yet, as Barnett (2005) has argued, these processes and outcomes are not necessarily “the outcome of highly coherent political-ideological projects” (p. 10). Indeed, the discourse analysis noted that some of what is considered “neoliberal” was more heavily espoused by the left-wing US blogs, supporting Barnett’s assertion that “hegemonic neoliberalism” is not some sort of coordinated, consistent project orchestrated exclusively by right-wing elites (ibid). As touched on in section 5.2.4, strands of neoliberalism such as “individualism,” and the outcomes they produce, should not necessarily be automatically considered as undesirable on their own. Therefore, this thesis finds that neoliberalism can be a useful theoretical label, as long as the application of the label does not create black and white opposition between “individualism” and “collectivism,” for example. Thus to clarify, this thesis does not suggest that all aspects of neoliberalism are detrimental to achieving sustainable outcomes, or that any doctrine is “simply” superior to another. The *imbalance* in favour of neoliberalisation in these political blogs does however urge concern given the lacking cognizance in this sample of the alternative, less neoliberal, approaches to sustainability, which have been urged by sustainability academics. It is the comparative lack of blog posts mentioning the need for redefining progress, reducing consumption, reducing inequality and localising sustainability, as called for in the literature review, which is perhaps of most concern.

6.3 Advertising’s influence

Much of the sustainability content in this study continues to reflect the fact that “all media continue to exist within a pervasive commercial system” (Kenix, 2011, pp. 163-164). This commercial system effectively ensures that media, regardless of ownership or advertising presence, rarely escape the influence of commercial ideology. Indeed, most of the political blogs here rarely challenged mainstream discourse about sustainability, regardless of the presence or absence of advertising. The sample therefore demonstrates very limited “dissent” as defined in the literature review, and no major evidence of more involved forms of activism such as “resistance” and

“rebellion.” The lack of resistance and rebellion is perhaps unsurprising, however the lack of dissent is somewhat surprising given that past research indicated popular political blog writers aim to provide alternative perspectives to mainstream media (Ekdale, et al., 2010, p. 224).

At the same time, as statistics about citizens’ priorities show the environment as an increasing concern (Garner, 2011), the potential for cooperation and convergence between mainstream and alternative media in their delivery of environmental content is increasingly likely. This is particularly noticeable in the establishment of green lifestyle magazines like *Good* in New Zealand, which manage to accommodate advertisers (including commercial ones) whilst simultaneously advocating for reduced consumption and involvement in NGO campaigns (see, for example, Morgan & Simmons, 2012, pp. 58-59). *Grist’s* (2009d) post about *Time* covering the problems with industrial agriculture is another example of mainstream media’s acknowledgment of the problems with giving industry too much power and freedom, and deployment of challenging discourses about the causes of environmental harm. The major benefit of political blogs covering sustainability issues, is that blogs are cheaper to access compared to mainstream outlets (particularly magazines), and can therefore provide a more open space for public engagement. However, the kind of engagement these political blogs facilitate is not necessarily always more progressive or conducive to social change compared to mainstream media outlets, as this study has shown.

6.4 Facilitating unique sustainability discussions?

These political blogs offer a valuable insight into the development of sustainability discourse from individuals whose thoughts may otherwise have remained invisible, through both the posts themselves to the comments. From the observational study, it was clear that there is great *potential* for audiences to expose themselves to a much wider range of fully articulated, unfiltered perspectives and ideas, to question and/or debate them. However, in conjunction with past research on blog readers, it appears the potential is still rarely utilised. There are also several caveats to consider when claiming that these political blogs facilitate a genuinely open public sphere. First, while anyone with an Internet connection *can* comment on some of these blogs, it appears the readerships of these blogs are highly unrepresentative of the general Internet population. According to Alexa’s ephemeral audience demographic information collected in March 2012¹¹, women are

¹¹ Alexa updates the statistics for pages constantly, so it is not conducive to cite a URL showing the results.

under-represented as readers on *all* of the New Zealand political blogs in this sample (both liberal and conservative), but are slightly over-represented on the American political blogs in this sample. Alexa also showed that on all the sites, those between the ages of 18 and 24 were consistently underrepresented (although to a minor extent on *The Huffington Post*). In contrast, Alexa showed that mainstream news sites like the *NZ Herald* and *TVNZ* have slightly more representative readerships of the general population in terms of age, sex and education (no information was available for *stuff.co.nz*, another popular news website). Second, discussion usually only lasted on the political blogs in this study for a few days, before readers and commenters started discussing on the latest post, even if conflicts in opinion from past posts had not been resolved. *The Standard*, *Think Progress* and *Grist* close the comments section after a set amount of time. This does not aid the goal of the public sphere to find consensus, and given that these political blogs, and many others, are not official sites of rulemaking or governance, there is very little incentive for participants to even reach consensus. Therefore while these blogs may facilitate open dialogue, the outcomes (if there are any) still differ dramatically from those desired by the ideal public sphere.

The question of whether political blogs may provide unique discourses or spaces for progressive discussions about sustainability has no simple answer. The results of research on blogs' potential for enhancing democratic deliberation (Koop & Jansen, 2009) are not straightforward either, and there is literature that is both "laudatory" and "derogatory" (see Cooper, 2006, p. 277). Thus, claims that the "blogosphere has, arguably, displaced mainstream media as a forum of critical journalism and strident debate" (Hope, 2012, p. 45) should perhaps continue to be "arguable," based on specifics. Given that political blogs can range from emotional to hard-hitting (Barlow, 2007, p. 175), it may be rather pointless to generalise. The inconsistent relationships between content, ideology and advertising presence indicate the difficulties with generalising conclusions about political blogs. Thus to both clarify and contribute to the complexity of research questions in blog research, perhaps the answer is that it depends on the blog, and the blogger. This answer reduces generalizability, but given the wildly varying findings and conclusions of blog research, including this study, it may be time to confront the possibility that blogs are not very generalizable to begin with.

6.5 Future research recommendations

This study focussed on well-read blogs, but it may be more productive for future research in this field to analyse less well-read blogs that focus specifically on sustainability. This is especially given that these blogs' readers (and writers) are not even very representative of the public. As touched on

in the previous section, the readers in this sample were particularly unrepresentative in terms of age and gender. Another study also found that political blog readers received overwhelmingly more education, were more partisan, and were far more politically interested compared to those that did not read blogs (Lawrence, et al., 2010, pp. 145-146). Furthermore, while less popular blogs may have few readers, the majority of blog readers actually follow many small blogs, rather than just the top blogs. Indeed, research on four thousand blog readers asking them to declare the blogs they read, resulted in a huge array of 476 blogs, where the median number of mentions of a blog was one (Lawrence, et al., 2010, p. 145). To consistently study only popular blogs, with a focus on politics, will likely lead to the recycling of findings based on only a miniscule proportion of the blogosphere.

Studying blogs which *focus*, rather than *touch on*, sustainability could provide a richer dataset for exploring the blogosphere's potential for promulgating alternative environmental discourse, in both the comments and the content. The influence of such blogs on reader's day to day life may also be far greater given that they often also cover lifestyle-related content that readers can make use of immediately. One well-known example covered by the *New York Times* as early as 2007 is the blog of "No Impact Man" which documents one family's attempt at reducing and changing their consumption to minimise resource use. *No Impact Man* is one of many blogs run by groups of "nonshoppers" (Green, 2007, p. 1). Given that past researchers have also found that political bloggers rarely encourage readers to engage in political activity (McKenna, 2007, p. 209), lifestyle blogs may also present more action-oriented discourse to study – and not just explicitly "green" blogs. Existing research shows that practices of anti-consumption, for example, occur for a variety of personally rewarding reasons, not just for environmental reasons (Black & Cherrier, 2010). The 2010 November/December issue of the *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* was dedicated to anti-consumption research, with most of the studies acknowledging the empowering and socially rewarding aspects of reduced consumption. Lifestyle blogs may have great potential in directly or indirectly prompting the first steps to awareness and sustainable change, yet few studies examine them.

As with other research that qualitatively analyses online discourse (Banaji & Buckingham, 2009), interviews with the bloggers in this sample would have been hugely beneficial (Ekdale, et al., 2010, p. 218), not least to clarify the meanings they wished to disseminate, their purpose in posting, and what urged them respond to comments, to name but a few examples. Furthermore, such interviews would reveal ways in which certain political blogs and mainstream media feed off each other, as these processes are rarely visible through analysis of post content alone. As some scholars have

argued, “finding pathways for cooperation has institutional as well as economic benefits,” (Kenix, 2011, p. 166) leading, potentially, to the wider dissemination of alternative discourse that is present in rare instances in these posts.

7 Conclusion

Despite the widely acknowledged practical importance of moving towards sustainability, the widespread international dedication to preserving and furthering a neoliberal political economic system has continued to contribute to an unsustainable level of environmental exploitation. “Sustainable development,” a globally promulgated aim, has attracted much criticism for its vagueness. In practice, neoliberalisation of nature worldwide continues, through the enclosure, valuation and privatisation of nature, governed increasingly by the market and consumers rather than governments and citizens. In tandem, environmental degradation worldwide has remained a major problem, prompting calls for a societal reconceptualization of progress, reduction of consumption, acknowledgement and reduction of inequality, and localisation. Given that the existing political economic system largely works in opposition to these aims, achieving them will be difficult, but the first step requires the widespread awareness and understanding of why these goals are necessary.

Mainstream media have an important role in enhancing public awareness and understanding of these sustainability issues. However, much of the literature has shown the media to be complicit in promulgating consumer-driven, market-led discourse that fails to challenge the major drivers of environmental problems. The reliance of the vast majority of mainstream media on corporate funding through advertising has been identified as a major reason for this complicity. This thesis therefore analysed an emerging form of “alternative” media, political blogs, to determine the extent to which they provided new opportunities for alternative discourses about sustainability and unique spaces in which to spark social change. There has been much scholarly debate about whether blogs are truly revolutionary in challenging mainstream media framing and acting as catalysts for grassroots progressive change. Given that advertising has been purported to influence media content, blogs with advertising and without advertising were studied, through qualitative observation, discourse analysis, and a quantitative content analysis to determine the statistical significance of key measurable variables. The combination of these methods sought to examine how political blogs discussed sustainability (with a particular focus on neoliberal discourse), how and whether advertising influenced content, and how and whether the content and technological capabilities of the blogs facilitated unique sustainability discussions compared to mainstream media.

The political blogs in this study were found to discuss sustainability rarely and superficially, with partisanship reducing much of the discussion to a personal level. This meant that there was a

relatively inconsistent pattern of what conservatives or liberals actually advocated for, with the main difference being that liberal blogs in this sample advocated for *more* action with regards to sustainability initiatives. Overall, both liberals and conservatives were very critical of each other, yet rarely did this critique consist of in-depth appraisals of policy prescriptions, rather, bloggers and commenters tended to mock or ridicule rather than rebut. While critique is certainly important in evaluating the relative merits of a certain approach to achieving sustainability, the overall lack of equal vigour for praising existing initiatives is slightly concerning, especially in conjunction with the overall extreme lack of advocacy for action, whether consumer or citizen oriented.

Far from challenging neoliberal discourse, the political blogs in this study mostly discussed sustainability with a focus on the economic costs, and more specifically, they reinforced neoliberal solutions to the sustainability problem regardless of advertising presence or political leaning. The blogs called for *altering* consumption far more than *reducing* consumption, and presented accommodating strategies such as education and incentives far more than they urged for regulation or systemic change. The blogs studied here also adopted a highly individualist discourse that continued to acknowledge the power of consumers and individual leaders rather than the power of collective citizens, or the regulatory measures through government. The lack of major difference between mainstream coverage and blog coverage may be partly attributable to the heavily reliance by these blogs on other media content, which was a source in the majority of posts. It can also be ascribed to the hegemony of neoliberal divisions between the state and civil society, which renders the market as society's governing body. In conjunction with other social, cultural and political contexts that encourage consent towards neoliberalisation, these political blogs illustrated the complex way neoliberalisation is expressed and accepted, not all of which can be considered inherently negative for the purposes of sustainability. Yet, the great imbalance toward neoliberal strategies for achieving sustainable environmental outcomes deserves continued concern.

The advertising-free blogs in this study did not promulgate vastly alternative perspectives about sustainability, compared to mainstream media. In fact the blogs which constituted the greatest challenge to the current political economic system were blogs that did contain advertising. This was attributed to the fact that advertising largely supplements political blogging, whereas in mainstream commercial media, it is the main source of revenue. The lack of major and expected differences between advertising blogs and advertising-free blogs was also attributed to the ability for political blogs to act as advertising "niches" for organisations that challenge mainstream media discourses, and the prevalence of commercialised ideology within all media.

Even though the political blogs studied here largely facilitated unchallenging, superficial discussions about sustainability, the value and potential of political blogs is still somewhat unique in a few important ways. Political blogs may not be able to replace traditional mainstream media any time in the near future, however they do act as an occasionally useful place for individuals to access perspectives otherwise not available or obvious to them in their immediate geographic location. The way that political blogs foster a relatively personalised, open, convenient space for Internet users to engage in politics was seen to enable productive dialogue, even if such productive dialogue was rare.

There is still far more research that could be done to determine the usefulness of other forums and media (on and offline) in improving the communication of sustainability, to include discourses that challenge the environmentally threatening aspects of our current political economic system. As touched on, with consumerism and neoliberalism so deeply embedded in the way sustainability is discussed, lifestyle publications may be a useful stepping stone to a more widespread acknowledgement that isolated consumer changes are not, and should not, be the *only* path to a more sustainable future. However, more research is needed on the way sustainability and neoliberalism are expressed and negotiated in media, both on and offline, given the complex ways in which they intersect with both personal and public life.

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Appendix I Coding sheet

Non-intercoded variables:

Blog

1. Huffington Post
2. Grist
3. Think Progress
4. Kiwi Blog
5. Whale Oil
6. The Standard
7. Home Paddock
8. No Minister
9. No Right Turn
10. NZ Conservative
11. Cactus Kate
12. Dim-Post

Advertising on blog

0. No commercial advertising 1. Commercial advertising present

Blog's ideological slant

0. Unclear
1. Liberal/left-wing
 2. Conservative/right-wing

Intercoded variables:

Variable : What sustainability is being discussed/touched upon?

Pollution/rubbish (inc. climate change)

0. NA 1. Present

Biodiversity

0. NA 1. Present

Natural resources (inc. land)

0. NA 1. Present

Energy

0. NA 1. Present

Food & agriculture

0. NA 1. Present

Economic (inc. costs of sust, jobs, and equality/poverty without social mention)

0. NA 1. Present

Social

0. NA 1. Present

“Sustainability” or “the environment” generally – only code when no other specifics in entire post

0. NA 1. Present

Variable: How is sustainability enhanced?

Education (includes campaigns, communication, conferences, more contact with nature, measuring sust)

0. NA 1. Present

Changing *style* of consumption (inc. greener/ethical consumption, innovation & tech)

0. NA 1. Present

Monetary or natural incentives/disincentives

0. NA 1. Present

Regulations, agreements, legislation, standards, rules (eg. ERMA, conservation efforts)

0. NA 1. Present

Reducing *amount* of consumption

0. NA 1. Present

Wider systemic change (eg. cradle-to-grave, localisation)

0. NA 1. Present

Other

0. NA 1. Present

Variable : Source types in post (not necessarily regarding sustainability)

Citizen not belonging in any of the above categories

0. NA 1. Present

Government (including MPs but not those who are only members of political parties, legislation/govt documents)

0. NA 1. Present

Industry & businesses

0. NA 1. Present

NGO

0. NA 1. Present

Media (includes bloggers, mainstream media)

0. NA 1. Present

Other

0. NA 1. Present

Variable: Who is trying to enhance sustainability in this post?

Individuals or consumers (not part of one of the following groups, eg. academic, scientist, ind artist)

0. NA 1. Present

Government/MP

0. NA 1. Present

Industry

0. NA 1. Present

NGOs

0. NA 1. Present

Media

0. NA 1. Present

Variable: Who presents a barrier to sustainability in this post?

Individuals or consumers (not part of one of the following groups, eg. academic, scientist, ind artist)

0. NA 1. Present

Government/MP

0. NA 1. Present

Industry

0. NA 1. Present

NGOs

0. NA 1. Present

Media

0. NA 1. Present

Variable : Motivation to act sustainably

More could be done to achieve sustainability (extent)

0. NA 1. Present

Some of what is being done to achieve sustainability is misguided (direction)

0. NA 1. Present

Variable: Audience empowerment

0. NA

1. Post urges non-commercial action/civil *action* at least once – must be in text

2. Post urges purchase (whether from a cause or company) at least once – must be explicit & in text

3. Post urges both non-commercial action and purchase at least once each.

Appendix II Additional coding rules

Variable: How is sustainability enhanced?

Monetary or natural incentives/disincentives

- Code cap-and-trade systems as monetary & regulations

Variable : Source types in post (not necessarily regarding sustainability)

NGO

- If the NGO primarily represents businesses, code as industry/business.
- Universities are NGOs, but academics/experts are citizens

Media (includes bloggers, mainstream media)

- Do not code if the blogger only links to self
- If in text it states the primary source, code for primary source rather than media. Eg. “prime minister said on television” would be coded under govt, not media. The exception is bloggers (unless the blogger is an MP)